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Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema

by

Yvonne Margaret Tasker

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Department of Film Studies**

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Summary:

The dissertation presents an account of the contemporary American action cinema. The themes, stereotypes and iconography associated with the genre are explored through detailed discussion of film examples. Films are also situated in relation to the particular context of production and consumption associated with 'new Hollywood', including genre hybrids, the blockbuster as a form and the importance of new forms of distribution such as home video. Though framed as a genre study, the account is also centrally concerned with an exploration of gender. The dissertation presents an account of the articulation of masculinity within the genre and engages with developing debates in this field. It is suggested that contemporary images of men, widely discussed as new, can be usefully explored in relation to the generic history from which they emerge. The articulation of masculinity in the genre is explored through both genre codes and star images. Recent distinctive roles for women in the action cinema are further situated in a generic context. The research also explores the contention that representations of gender should be understood within an exploration of other discourses including race, class and sexuality. The place of black performers in the genre is discussed, and the extent to which recent films reiterate and/or develop existing stereotypes is addressed in this context. The limitations of ideological and narrative analysis in relation to a political exploration of the popular cinema is explored, with a consideration of cinematic spectacle and the place of fantasy identifications and symbolic configurations of power. The political ambivalence of popular imagery is emphasised in this context. It is argued that action films, which are often dismissed as simplistic in political terms articulate complex configurations of gendered and other identities.

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Declaration:

The discussion of Michael Mann's work in chapter three appears in 'Tonight I Made No Difference', an article written with Valerie Hill and published in the journal Over Here Volume 10, Number 2, 1992. Aspects of the material presented in chapters four and six have been published as an essay 'Dumb Movies for Dumb People: Masculinity, the body and the voice in contemporary action cinema' in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds) Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema (Routledge, 1993). A short version of the discussion of Thelma and Louise contained in chapter seven has been published in 20 ans du theories feministes sur le cinema, edited by Bernice Reynaud and Ginette Vincendeau (CinemAction Editions du Cent, 1993). In addition this research has formed the basis for a book, Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema (Routledge, 1993).

INTRODUCTION: GENDER AND THE ACTION CINEMA

The cinematic image of Sylvester Stallone as Vietnam veteran John Rambo, brandishing a rocket-launcher whilst parading his musculature, was to become an icon of American masculinity in the mid-1980s. As the decade went on, though, Stallone was displaced in popularity by the even larger figure of ex-Mr Universe Arnold Schwarzenegger. These two stars provided the most publicised, most visible image of the figure of the muscular male hero who had come to dominate the American action cinema of the 1980s. Many critics saw the success of Stallone and Schwarzenegger as a disturbing sign, signalling the evolution of a previously unseen cinematic articulation of masculinity. At the same time these figures echoed unsettling images from the past, through their implicit invocation of a fascist idealisation of the white male body. Combining an ability to signify both concerns about the future and the horrors of the past, the box-office appeal of the male bodybuilder provided a resonant image for the mid-1980s. Coming at the particular point that it did, the success of these films and stars could also be read in terms of a backlash against the feminism of the 1970s, as indicative of a new conservatism in both national and sexual politics.

As I will show, the muscular action hero was, for some, a figure who represented the antithesis of the 'new man',

himself a creation of advertising images in the early 1980s, and the feminist gains he supposedly represented. These competing images indicate the extent to which masculinity has been called into question through the 1980s and since. It seems as if, at the same time as the male body on the screen was becoming more and more visible, an excessive parody of an ideal, masculinity was emerging as a visible category within the criticism of the day. (1) Both action films themselves and this analysis of them emerge then from a critical and cultural context in which the multiple meanings of masculine identity, the existence of masculinities, has^{ve} been made increasingly apparent.

As much as these films may represent something new, the appearance of what I will term a 'muscular cinema' during the 1980s also calls on a much longer tradition of representation. I refer here not only to the evident appeal which the figure of the male bodybuilder makes to notions of classical culture, but to the existence of cinematic traditions which prefigure the popular action movies of the 1980s. The series of successful films centred on the figure of Indiana Jones, for example, refer explicitly back to the adventure serials of an earlier cinematic moment. What clearly distinguishes the action cinema of the recent past is the large-scale budgets that have become associated with the genre. Indeed this is conveyed quite precisely by the difference between the high

production values of Spielberg's Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (1984) and the low-budget adventure serials it takes as a reference point.

The low budget tradition of Italian mythological films and the numerous Tarzan films produced in Hollywood had, for many years, provided film roles for star bodybuilders and athletes such as Steve Reeves and Johnny Weissmuller. (2) Though the popularity of a fictional figure such as Tarzan, in terms of sheer number of films generated, indicates the centrality of the white male body in these cinematic traditions, black American sports stars such as O J Simpson and Fred Williamson have also found film roles within the action tradition. (3) These cinematic traditions produced films that were characteristically low budget, receiving marginal critical attention and with minimal advertising budgets. It is by way of contrast to these earlier historical moments that during the 1980s and early 1990s, Arnold Schwarzenegger was vaunted as the highest paid film star of his day.

It is the sheer scale of the budgets, the box-office success, and of the male bodies on display that seems to have shifted in the Hollywood cinema of the 1980s. In the same period the connotations surrounding bodybuilding as a practice and as a competitive sport have shifted from freakish marginality to the mainstream of western health

culture. (4) These shifts form part of a gradual redefinition of images of masculine identity which has evolved partly through the commodification of the male body. Reference to films from earlier periods in Hollywood's history, such as the many versions of the Tarzan narrative, serves to remind us that there are antecedents for the evident commodification of the male body in contemporary culture. Whilst the narratives of these films, as with sub-genres such as the mythological epic, were driven by action, they also offered a set of visual pleasures focused on the display of the male body. Indeed it is the emphasis on action in these films which both legitimates, through the affirmation of an active understanding of masculinity, and provides a narrative justification for such physical display. (5) The relationship between action and display, indeed Hollywood's production of action as display through the spectacular bodies of its muscular stars, provides a central focus for the discussion of male images in the pages that follow.

During the initial stages of this project I became convinced that the figure of 'woman' was in the process of being eclipsed from the Hollywood cinema altogether. It seemed that sets of anxieties to do with gender identity were being inscribed almost exclusively over the tortured figure of the white male body. This perception was heightened by a cycle of films concerned with fatherhood

such as Three Men and A Baby (Leonard Nimoy, 1987) and Parenthood (Ron Howard, 1989) which found popular success during the late 1980s. Yet, rather than representing some dramatic final break, such films can be taken as only part of the ceaseless process of redefinition and renegotiation operating in relation to images and understandings of gendered identity. Whilst it is possible, to a certain extent, to discern trends within the history of American film, I will argue that we should not attempt to erase the contradictions with which films and critics - both part of contemporary culture - are having to contend. Thus, counter to the early 1980s, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the release of several films featuring aggressive, gun-toting heroines. Films such as Aliens (James Cameron, 1986), Thelma and Louise (Ridley Scott, 1991), and Terminator 2 (James Cameron, 1991) have had highly publicised cinema releases.

The success of these films serves to highlight the existence of a cinematic tradition which has placed women at the centre of the action narrative, a tradition that stretches back to the 1970s. (6) As with the films featuring male stars to which I have already referred, these new films are distinguished by their move to big-budget status. Accompanying such hefty production budgets is, amongst other things, a matching advertising budget. Thus images of the action heroine taken from these films

have had a very high media profile. While it is true of course that the most reproduced image from Terminator 2 was that of Schwarzenegger as the cyborg which first brought him cult star status, the image of Linda Hamilton as Sarah Connor has quickly acquired a cult following of her own with, for example, lesbian audiences. (7)

The release and success of films such as Terminator 2 qualified my initial intention to concern myself with gender, masculinity in particular, concentrating almost exclusively on men in the action cinema. These films reinscribe, in different ways, the female body in terms of masculinity. It is for this reason that I want to introduce the term 'musculinity'. 'Musculinity' indicates the extent to which a physical definition of masculinity in terms of a developed musculature is not limited to the male body within representation. Along with Megan Turner/Jamie Lee Curtis in Kathryn Bigelow's Blue Steel (1990), heroines such as Ripley and Sarah Connor are part of an emergent action tradition to which female stars are central, though obviously it is still male stars who command more money and status within Hollywood. The analyses opened up in chapter one and developed in chapter seven deal specifically with the significance of these action heroines. I hope to offer here both a limited account of the recent history of the action heroine, and a specific address to the emergence of

a muscular female heroine and the problems that these figures pose for binary conceptions of gendered identity.

Constructions of 'race' are also central to the action cinema. The analysis of the action heroine in chapter one concludes with a discussion of the role of Whoopi Goldberg as Rita Rizzoli in the police film Fatal Beauty (Tom Holland, 1987). This film encounters problems in the positioning of Goldberg as a black performer in the symbolic order of things which operates in the police narrative. The elements of incoherence which seem to result from her casting at the centre of the narrative makes~~s~~ apparent the extent to which the action narrative relies on an equation between blackness and marginality, blackness and criminality.

Speaking of the representation of Afro-American women in film James R. Nesteby suggests that the 'most important stereotype of all' may be the 'sheer facelessness', the invisibility, of black women in Hollywood film (Nesteby 1982: 203). Given the symbolic importance of this invisibility, of the black performers who populate the streets and the prisons of action movies, Fatal Beauty confronts something of a crisis of representation. Other films, as I will discuss, attempt to experiment with the codes of representation in order to position either white women or black men at the centre of the narrative, whilst

retaining a space of marginality. In Fatal Beauty Goldberg is ultimately isolated within the frame to such a degree that she almost seems at times to be in a different film from the rest of the cast.

The significance of a marginal blackness in American action cinema is developed in chapter two through an analysis of the role of the black male buddy and the black action hero. Despite the dominance of white stars, it is in forms like the action cinema in which both male and female protagonists are often defined by their physicality, that, in line with stereotypes, black actors have been given significant, if rarely starring roles. In Die Hard (John McTiernan, 1988), as in other 1980s films, black characters act as supportive figures for the white hero. The relationship between John McClane (Bruce Willis) and Sergeant Al Powell (Reginald Veljohnson) is central to the development of the narrative, yet Powell is also a marginal figure - literally positioned on the sidelines. Similarly by the time of Rocky III (Sylvester Stallone, 1982) Carl Weathers' character, Apollo Creed, has shifted from the role of Rocky's opponent, as in the first two films, to that of friend and trainer. Yet at this very point Mr T enters to take up the role of chief villain. It is not until Rocky IV (Sylvester Stallone, 1985) that the boxer is pitted against a white fighter in the climactic battle. Donald Bogle has described the Al Powell figure in Die Hard.

as the 'black-buddy-as-mammy-nuturer', a type he links to a range of representations through the 1980s which paired black and white actors (Bogle 1991: 276). Following from a discussion of this buddy pairing, chapter two concludes with a discussion of Danny Glover's role alongside Mel Gibson, in the hugely successful Lethal Weapon films and, substituting for Schwarzenegger, as Lieutenant Mike Harrigan in Predator 2 (Stephen Hopkins, 1990). (8)

Outside Hollywood it is the Asian stars, both male and female, of the Hong Kong industry who have defined and developed the action genre. Cynthia Rothrock, a white martial arts star who is discussed in chapter one, made her first films in Hong Kong. Such films are made, by and large, for Asian markets but are also popular in the west where they are generally accessible through video. Traces of the innovations for which the Hong Kong industry has been responsible are evident in the American action cinema. (9)

The issues raised through a discussion of race problematise any simple analysis of the working out of gender and sexuality in the action picture. For the black male hero to parade his muscular torso bears vastly different connotations from the display of the white hero. The discussion offered here represents the beginnings of an inquiry into the complex ways in which the action cinema

constitutes 'race', how power is written differently over the black, white and Asian bodies of its heroes and heroines.

My analysis of the contemporary action cinema proceeds from two basic premises. Firstly that the appearance of a muscular cinema, rather than signalling a radical break with the past, inflects and redefines already existing cinematic and cultural discourses of race, class and sexuality. Secondly that it is worth attempting to give an account, rather than an 'explanation', of both the pleasures and the political significance of these popular films. Such an account might allow an attention to the complex ways in which popular cinema affirms gendered identities at the same time as it mobilises identifications and desires which undermine the stability of such categories. These two modes are matched by the operations of much academic film criticism which seeks politically to pin down popular cinema at the same time as celebrating (selected) examples of its ambiguous plurality.

Part of the motivation for this project lies in the conviction that the critical colonisation of popular cinema, whose products are judged by the standards of high culture, is intimately bound up with class and with the operation of cultural power more generally. It is a concern that, within the parameters of feminist criticism,

popular texts and pleasures are often subject to analysis only in order to be understood, transcended and moved beyond. Forms like the romance, popular with so many readers, often seemed to be taken to function only as little more than obstacles on the route to participation in high culture, and political consciousness. (10) Part of my concern in this project, then, is to attempt to think about popular forms within another framework, one in which these same forms might be taken to have something to say.

Elsewhere, I have characterised the critical construction of muscular cinema as 'Dumb Movies for Dumb People', a phrase which signals some of the issues of cultural power that are at stake in thinking about the status and the operations of action cinema (in Cohan and Hark eds 1993). It raises at an immediate level the significant silence of the heroes, the primacy of the body over the voice in the telling of these stories. The phrase also expresses something of the contempt with which this form of popular culture and its audience has been evaluated. Whilst a desire to think through issues of politics and sexuality in the cinema is familiar, I hope that an exploration of these questions in relation to the action cinema may allow the possibility of a perspective which does not exclusively construct the popular cinema as the object of analysis. As products of particular historical moments, and as formed by and through a variety of political discourses, both popular

cinema and academic cultural criticism can be included within a broad definition of 'culture'. The fact that the former tends to address a working class audience whilst the latter has tended to be the privilege of the middle classes, has sometimes led to the mistaken assumption that one can tell 'us' all 'we' might want to know about the 'other'.

If the phrase 'Dumb Movies for Dumb People' indicates the extent to which the pleasures of the action cinema are primarily those of spectacle rather than dialogue, then this might also help us to understand the contempt with which these films have been critically received. When I speak of the pleasures of spectacle, I do not refer solely to special effects or the staging of spectacular stunts, but to some of the more general visual qualities which define the cinematic experience. By way of contrast, film criticism has often emphasised the operations of narrative. Hence the significance often given to the moment of narrative resolution as a way to decode the politics of a given text. (11) Whilst valuable work has been undertaken on, for example, cinema-going as a social practice, the cinema as sensuous experience is too often neglected. Features such as the breathtaking nature of visual spectacle, or the feelings of exhilaration at the expansive landscapes in which the hero operates, are fundamental to the action cinema.

The model I am working from here is not based on an opposition between form and content. Within the action cinema, and probably within other modes of popular cinema, the two are bound up together so that the 'action' of action cinema refers to the enactment of spectacle as narrative. Instead of an opposition between form and content then, I refer here to the contradictory desires to which we are subject as the audience for the performance of a given text. We want to find out, to follow the narrative through to its conclusion and the revelation of knowledge that accompanies this. At the same time we wish to stop and stare, to linger over details. I do not want to argue that spectacle has no content, or that it cannot be commented on in political terms. (12) Yet popular cinema is as much concerned with visual pleasure as it is with narrative development and in the action cinema visual display is elevated to a defining feature of the genre.

As signalled in its gradual transition to big-budget status, the action cinema has been an immensely successful cinematic venture in the 1980s. Given my concern with the cinematic qualities of the genre, it is ironic that a key factor in this transition has been the success of action films on the video market. The multiplicity of films and images circulating on the cinema and on the video market today provides, however, an important context for thinking about Hollywood in the 1980s and 1990s. The films

discussed are part of an international context of media production, distribution and consumption. In chapter three I offer a brief industrial context for talking about recent Hollywood production.

Features such as generic knowingness, a sense of parody, which are present to varying degrees within action films represent a more widespread aspect of recent Hollywood production. An attention to such formal qualities reveals, in relation to a film like Die Hard the limitations of a content-based form of ideological analysis. I want to signal an understanding of such films as being rather more than a simple enactment of white male supremacism. In chapter four I discuss a range of inflections of the action hero persona through an examination of different star images and character types. This allows for an understanding of the complex processes of signification at work in the construction of the action hero, through the cinema itself, and through the circulation of star images in other media. Questions of the body, masculinity and power are taken up further in chapter six in an investigation of the significance of the physical display that is emphasised in recent action films.

As noted above, the much publicised release of Rambo: First Blood Part II (George Pan Cosmatos, 1985) signalled a new visibility for the muscular hero of the action cinema.

Breaking numerous international box-office records, Rambo achieved almost instant notoriety. Reference to 'Rambo' extended well beyond the film's enthusiastic audience, and by 1987 both the British and the American press had begun to speak of the 'age of Rambo'. By the end of the decade 'Rambo' had entered the updated edition of the Oxford English Dictionary. John Rambo is the hero of three films to date, though the character originally appeared in David Morrell's 1972 novel First Blood. (13) An outsider hero, Rambo achieved an immense rhetorical significance in the mid-1980s. When writers, critics, politicians or other spokesmen and women talked of 'Rambo-style films' they were referring to what was perceived to be a disturbing new phenomenon, a type of violent popular cinema to which Rambo could give a name. Cultural and political concerns were intimately bound together by pundits who cast the young male American audience for Rambo as the 'new right' voters who had supported Ronald Reagan. (14)

With the notable exceptions of the western and the gangster genres, traditions of action cinema have achieved neither aesthetic nor political credibility within film studies. The kinds of critical investigations elaborated around forms such as the western or the gangster film of the 1930s have been absent in relation to the contemporary action picture, perhaps because such studies of popular forms have largely been produced retrospectively. While the success

of Rambo has generated numerous commentaries, these have largely been framed in terms of an address to the truth, or otherwise, of the cinema's rendition of American involvement in Vietnam. That is, both the film and the genre of which it is a part, have been discussed within a realist paradigm which assesses the narrative in terms of truth. To ask whether a film is 'true' is, fairly obviously, to assume a measure by which to judge. I will argue though that the realist paradigm, when applied to popular films like Rambo, presumes an ontology which itself needs to be investigated.

The tendency for critics to focus exclusively on the narrative of Rambo, judging it against other kinds of accounts of the American forces in Vietnam, may well stem from the assumption that the construction and the appeal of the action cinema is obvious. Analysis of the films has little significance if one accepts the premise that there is nothing to be said about them, other than to signal the genres' ideological complicity with the operations of patriarchal capitalism, to say, for example, that the film is Reaganite propaganda, or that it is 'lying'. Leslie Fiedler is one of the few critics who has attempted to think about the film in terms of the mythical voicing of the unspeakable, in an analysis which opens up questions of whose story is being told, to whom, and why, within the Vietnam narrative. (15) Another negative critical

operation can be found more recently in accounts of Thelma and Louise which was judged, and found wanting, as an account of women's lives. (16) The standards of truth against which popular films have been judged, standards which rarely admit the complexity of terms like fantasy, can also operate to silence the other stories to which they attempt to give a voice.

The action cinema depends on a complex articulation of both belonging and exclusion, an articulation which is bound up in the body of the hero and the masculine identity that it embodies. These dramas of belonging and exclusion mobilise discourses of national, racial and gendered identity through intimate fictional groupings such as the platoon, the police squad or the buddy relationship. Chapter five examines the dramatisation of nationhood and masculinity in the American action cinema, specifically in terms of the way in which images of warfare are mobilised. Rambo's box-office success seemed to function as a trigger for the release of a 'second wave' of American films concerned with Vietnam. The majority of muscular movies, by way of contrast to Vietnam films such as Oliver Stone's Platoon (1986), are not concerned with a specific historical moment or even a specific geographical location. Rather, the unspecified setting of the action film opens up a discussion of ideas of nationhood particularly in relation

to the heroic figure who is rarely given any social location.

Various critics, as I will discuss, have seen the muscular body of the action hero as a triumphant assertion of male power. Others, such as Barbara Creed have viewed the Schwarzenegger persona in terms of the articulation of a set of anxieties about the very masculine identity that they seem to embody so forcefully. (17) The question of whether these films and their heroes offer viewers the male body in crisis or the body triumphant, or whether that opposition itself is a useful one, is developed in chapter six. It is worth noting though that 'physical actors' such as Stallone, Schwarzenegger and Norris have been represented by some critics as grotesque figures who are potentially out of control, framed by images of the monstrous and the deviant. The critical language with which a popular film such as Rambo or its star, Sylvester Stallone, has been discussed has tended to extend that rhetoric of the monstrous, pathologising the film's audience. In this critical process particular cultural products and forms come to seem dangerous, signifying anarchy or the threat of it. As concerns for the effects of a mass culture on the social body have so frequently testified, such responses are not new. (18) The fear and loathing that a muscular cinema inspired in the liberal/cultural elite and the popular press in the mid-

1980s ('No, No to Rambo' read a headline in the Daily Mirror) seems to indicate in part a fear of the audience for such films. (19)

In contrast to the images of anarchic violence that have critically accompanied muscular cinema, it is, in fact, the values of self-control rather than chaos, and the practices of training and discipline which are extolled as central terms in the definition of bodybuilding and in the image of the muscleman hero of 1980s cinema. The visual spectacle of the male body that is central to muscular movies puts into play the two contradictory terms of restraint and excess. Whilst the hero and the various villains of the genre tend to share excessive physical strength, the hero is also defined by his restraint in putting his strength to the test. And it is the body of the male hero which provides the space in which a tension between restraint and excess is articulated. (20)

As I explore further in chapter four such a tension is mediated through both horror and comedy. It is also important to note though that whilst Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Dolph Lundgren and others are cast as monstrous in one view, they are pin-ups in another, their bodies self-created works of art, constantly worked over and redefined. The active construction of the body invoked within muscular mythology offers the kinds of possibilities

for change to which the small ads in mens¹ magazines appeal, the promise that, as reward for time and energy invested, a new image will look back at us from the mirror.

In terms of their relation to issues of gender, these kinds of appeal can be usefully explored through feminist discourses on women, fashion, and the body beautiful. (21)

Feminist writers have analysed in detail the oppressive ideals involved in notions of the body beautiful. Women's magazines, for example, tend to assume 'natural', racially exclusive, standards of beauty, standards which are seemingly made attainable via the cosmetics industry.

Bodybuilding and health culture has generated an industry comparable to that of beauty culture, with competing systems and products marketed through different magazines.

Whilst bodybuilding was initially directed almost exclusively at men, and certainly the most visible image of the bodybuilder was that of the white male, this image has been modified in recent years. An examination of films such as Perfect (James Bridges, 1985) and Pumping Iron II: The Women (George Butler, 1984) in chapter seven, serves to show the rather different connotations at work in women's involvement in aerobics and bodybuilding. While the 'ideal' images that are offered in bodybuilding, health culture and beauty culture cannot be replaced with images that simply correspond to the 'truth' of women's experience, these forms offer a range of competing images

within which a (limited) physical definition of identity can be negotiated. (22) This is precisely the promise and the desire for change that is worked on in these images and in the huge industries that they support.

'Making Mr Right'

A useful contemporary reference point is provided by Susan Seidelman's film Making Mr Right (1988) which operates as a post-feminist reworking of the Frankenstein scenario, situating concerns of creation and control within a new historical context. The film's central character is Frankie Stone/Ann Magnuson, a public relations consultant and image-maker. The plot concerns her attempt, after resigning from the campaign to re-elect South Florida congressman and boyfriend Steve Marcus/Ben Masters, to make the socially inept Ulysses android user-friendly enough to attract much needed congress dollars for parent company Chemtec. The narrative tension of Making Mr Right is structured by two opposing classes or types of creation, as the language of science and of the world of media and public relations come into conflict.

To achieve media saturation for Ulysses, Frankie advises on the need to 'polish up his social graces'. Meanwhile, Ulysses' scientist creator, Dr Jeff Peters (both are played by John Malkovich), rages at the introduction of 'emotional ticks that I have worked to get out of my own personality'.

Jeff's pet project, his fantasy, is the exploration of deep space, for which Ulysses has been specifically designed in order to cope with the problems of isolation. Yet Ulysses, under Frankie's influence, becomes too humanised. He not only falls in love, but delights in those social occasions and settings in which his creator is so clearly uncomfortable. Ulysses escapes from the laboratory that Jeff escapes to. The android wanders around the mall, is wide-eyed at the Miami skyline, eats junk food instead of protein paste, dances the conga at a wedding and so on.

Ulysses takes to postmodern life with relative ease. He learns from television: taking up Steve Marcus' election slogan - 'It takes a man this sensitive to know your needs' - and quizzing Jeff on the exact relation between sex and love. In the film's final twist Jeff takes the place of Ulysses, fulfilling his own boyhood dream of voyaging into space which, for him, is 'truly the most exciting thing in the world'. Jeff's are the final words of the film, heard over images on the TV screen in Frankie's apartment. When asked how he is coping with the isolation he replies, 'I'm not very good with people'. The glib superficiality of the Marcus campaign slogan indicates the film's concern with the territory of identities forged in and through the mass media. Seidelman explores not only different images and versions of masculinity but the constructedness of these different ways of being a man. The world of PR in which

Frankie works relocates the questions raised by the scientific creation of life to a postmodern context in which the activity of making rather than meeting the mythical figure of 'Mr Right' is fantasised as a possibility. The construction of the raw material - Ulysses - is only a starting point. The importance of the social skills in which Frankie specialises poses a set of questions about the formulation of identity.

Judith Williamson's comments on Seidelman's film usefully locate it within the 1980s rubric of the 'new man'. Ulysses, as Williamson notes, is brand new. And, as she goes on to point out '[t]he key fact about the new man is that he doesn't exist'. As a combination of 'a marketing concept and a projection of modern women's desires, the emotional, sensitive, tender Loving Hunk is no more real than the Living Doll who was, similarly, an amalgam of consumer products and male fantasies' (Williamson 1988: 28). Williamson's analogy between a fantasy of ideal femininity circulating in the mass media of the 1960s and the more recent construction of the 'new man' is pertinent here. Much discussion of the 'new man' has centred on whether or not this figure exists, which is to say whether a figure created within advertising has any correspondence with 'real life'. Yet as feminists discovered in their interrogation of female types like the 'living doll', it is the construction of different definitions of femininity

rather than the truth value of particular images that is significant. This is surely one of the reasons why image-makers, such as Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger, have reworked images derived from mass media sources such as advertising in order to produce a commentary on the formation of identity within and through these same media. (23) While the different images of the 'new man' and the muscular hero may have no, or few, referents, they do have determinants.

Like Seidelman's earlier Desperately Seeking Susan (1985), Making Mr Right is very precisely situated in a world of images, surfaces and lifestyle options. Frankie Stone is the epitome of the post-feminist heroine, successful in business and unlucky in love. We see her as busy, capable and dressed to perfection. The film opens with Frankie waking up to images of Marcus clutching a beauty queen on her television screen. Though she is wearing a T-shirt with the legend 'Marcus is My Man', when the congressman calls round he finds himself locked out. As Marcus drives away a life-size cardboard cut-out of himself, wearing a smile in the role of sincere politician, sails down from the window to be crushed under the wheels of his car. Here Frankie rejects the first of many versions of masculinity to be offered in the film.

In the credit sequence that follows Seidelman charts Frankie's transformation from one image to another as she drives to work. Frankie holds up the traffic as she shaves her legs, sprays on her perfume and fixes her face. Striding into a conference room she announces "I'm always late but I'm worth it" to the waiting representatives from Chemtec. Later, when Ulysses empties out Frankie's bag he finds a set of accessories familiar to the readers of women's magazines: a copy of Smart Women, Foolish Choices, lipstick, cigarettes, hairdryer, diaphragm, tights, snapshots... Meanwhile Donahue plays on the TV in the background, with the host quizzing the audience on the search for 'Mr Right'. The bewildering range of objects and images offered to Ulysses, and possibly to us, in this scene echoes Frankie's earlier arrival at work when she reels off an order for 'breakfast as usual' along with 'Cosmopolitan, Glamour, New Woman, Complete Woman, Working Woman and Modern Wrestler'. Frankie consumes mass culture for breakfast. This litany of the modern working woman's reading jokily signals woman as consumer, an important theme for the film.

The romance narrative of Making Mr Right draws from this context of competing images, a discourse derived in part from women's magazines with the possibilities that they offer of making opportunities, make-up, creation and self-creation. The film thus draws on the kinds of feminist

understandings offered through mass media forms like women's magazines, invoking the kinds of powerful images associated in the 1980s with an aggressively sexual, and image-conscious, figure such as Madonna. (24) As Williamson points out, 'the stress is not on women switching images' as in Desperately Seeking Susan 'but on women as consumers of images - and of men, in relation to whom the film functions like a Which guide' (Williamson 1988: 29). There is an accompanying stress on man as image, an attention to the many different definitions of masculinity which are available within contemporary culture. Even Jeff, who prides himself on his isolation from society, reveals that he has worked on his personality. We also discover that Jeff knows enough about the signifiers of masculinity to give Ulysses an enormous penis for 'confidence'.

The very texture of Making Mr Right, with its bold use of colour and its Florida setting, invokes a sense of the fabrication of social life and of the existence of different, competing identities. Generic awareness and intertextuality are fundamental to these textual qualities though, as I will show, this is far from unique in contemporary cinema. Making Mr Right draws on the romance narrative, screwball comedy, science-fiction, and soap opera. The film manages to parody them all, whilst still keeping them in play. A sense of change and transformation

is at work here, an awareness of the constant renegotiation of both generic and gendered identities. The postmodern play with images and identities that characterises both Making Mr Right and the figure of the bodybuilder begins to mobilise metaphors of construction, creation and change.

The intertextuality at work in Making Mr Right makes apparent the extent to which gendered identity is formed and transformed through our consumption of images. But the film also draws attention to the operations of form. Picking up on these themes, this project has both a general and a specific aim. Specifically, I hope here to deliver an analysis of the action cinema, a genre that is both popular with audiences and critically neglected. A central concern is with the cinematic qualities of the action cinema, the importance of visual spectacle. Kathryn Bigelow is, in this context, one of the most striking directors working in the action cinema today. Her rendition of the vampire myth in Near Dark (1987) and of the police film in Blue Steel (1990) involve images of both startling physicality and breathtaking beauty. Chapter eight centres on an analysis of Bigelow's work, which also provides a way to bring together some of the key themes of this project.

Though this final chapter focuses on the work of one director, it is not intended as an author study. The films

discussed allow an illustration and elaboration of the themes addressed throughout: the development of generic conventions, the functioning of gendered discourse, the importance of visual spectacle, and so on. Whilst it is certainly the case that Bigelow's films (thus far) do reveal similarities of theme and style, my analysis aims to locate these similarities generically. Chapter eight does address though the way in which Bigelow's status as a woman working in the action cinema has generated both curiosity and perhaps rather exaggerated expectations from critics. (25) Her 1991 film, Point Break is discussed as a fascinating excursion into the territory of male-bonding. The sensations evoked in the skydiving and underwater sequences prove as interesting as the obvious play with the intensity of male bonding and homo-eroticism. The film is singled out partly because it is so accomplished. The critical reception of Point Break though also returns me to the ways in which action-based texts, action stars and the rest of the creative teams associated with them, are so routinely dismissed in prominent discourses.

In the conclusion I attempt to draw together the concerns of this dissertation, discussing different critical and theoretical approaches to the popular cinema. The conclusion comments on the status of both the action cinema as genre and gendered discourse within it. It has been claimed for example, that the genre has reached an end,

with the relative failure of the self-reflexive Last Action Hero (John McTiernan, 1993) widely cited. By way of contrast, I hope to demonstrate that genres develop and evolve, rather than simply end. The conclusion also addresses recent arguments which point to a renewed centrality for images of a strong paternal figure within the popular American cinema's discourse on masculine identities.

CHAPTER ONE: THE ACTION HEROINE: GENDER, SEXUALITY, RACE

Introduction

This chapter discusses the role of the action heroine in recent American cinema. Although the primary focus is the 1980s, some examples are also taken from the 1970s. It is argued that the popular cinema has given rise to several traditions within which the heroine emerges as an active figure. The use of stereotypes, particularly in those films drawn from comic book sources is discussed, pointing up the limits of these traditions. The chapter ends with a case-study of Whoopi Goldberg's role in Fatal Beauty (1987) which develops questions concerning the place of black women within these traditions of representation.

Women in the Action Cinema

Pictured alongside Sylvester Stallone, whose box-office success in the roles of Rocky and Rambo represented a particular and very visible inflection of masculine identity in the cinema of the 1980s, was found, for a time, the image of the star's then wife, Brigitte Nielson. (1) Shortly after her arrival in America Nielson had played the part of a comic book swordswoman, alongside Arnold Schwarzenegger, in the mythological epic Red Sonja (Richard Fleischer, 1985). Nielson also played the wife of Rocky's opponent in Rocky IV (1985) and had roles in Cobra (George Pan Cosmatos, 1986) and Beverly Hills Cop II (Tony Scott,

1987). Though she was associated with the action genre through such roles, it was her marriage to Stallone that gave Nielson extensive media visibility. A six foot, muscular blonde Nielson's androgynous image combined 'masculine' characteristics, such as her height, muscular physique and boyish short hair, with an exaggerated female sexuality.

Nielson embodied the big-breasted sexualised fantasy woman of comic book traditions, whilst emphasising the more 'masculine' elements that also form an important part of this figure. The promotional stories circulated through spaces such as women's magazines are indicative of the rather unsettling aspects of this image, in that they often centre on sexuality and on Nielson's location in relation to traditional discourses of womanhood. Along with persistent rumours of both lesbian and heterosexual affairs, questions about her 'fitness' as a mother undermined Nielson's 'femininity', whilst rumours of cosmetic surgery similarly emphasise her constructedness as against some 'natural' notion of womanhood. A regular 'comic' interview question concerned whether men were afraid of her, a formulation which is indicative of the uncertainties generated by her image.

Nielson embodied then a contradictory set of images of female desirability: a sexualised image which emphasises

physical strength and stature. Like the figure of the muscular male hero, Nielson's version of the action heroine borrows from comic strip traditions which involve the use of parodic, exaggerated characterisations of gendered identity. Indeed the increased visibility of male and female action stars within American movie culture are bound up with each other. What then is the significance of the emergence of the action heroine within Hollywood cinema? How has the Hollywood cinema represented the action heroine and how has this changed in relation to the shifting persona of the muscular action hero?

At one level the action heroine represents a response of some kind to feminism, emerging from a changing political context in which images of gendered identity have been increasingly shifted through popular cultural forms. Equally the persona of the action heroine borrows on well-established stereotypes such as that of the tomboy, so that the heroine who is cast as the hero's sidekick can be read as a girl who has not yet accepted the responsibilities of adult womanhood. The heroine of Hollywood action pictures has more commonly been figured as romantic interest for the hero. The female fighter as centre of the action, whilst only emerging relatively recently in American film, has for some time been an important figure in Hong Kong action traditions. It was in Hong Kong, for example, that

American martial arts star Cynthia Rothrock, whose films are discussed in more detail below, made her first films.

Sigourney Weaver's role as Ripley, in Alien (Ridley Scott, 1979), Aliens (James Cameron, 1986) and Alien3 (David Fincher, 1992), has become one of Hollywood's most visible, and much discussed, action heroines of recent years. The characterisation of Ripley in Ridley Scott's original film represented a significant development in the portrayal of the action heroine, combining icons of the action narrative with elements from the horror film. The climatic^c action sequences of the film, in which Ripley undresses before her final confrontation with the alien, has^{ve} generated much debate concerning the limits and possibilities of the cinematic representation of the action heroine. (2) Weaver reputedly dubbed her role in the second film as 'Rambolina', acknowledging the film's rather self-conscious allusions to the Rambo narrative and persona. Aliens has Ripley, having been betrayed by the 'company', decked out in weaponry to do battle with the mother alien. Director James Cameron had co-written the screenplay for Rambo as well as directing another key action film of the 1980s, The Terminator. The Alien sequence of films are discussed further in chapter seven, alongside the figure of the muscular heroine. The figure of Ripley raises interesting questions of symbolic transgression, of the extent to which the positioning of a woman at the centre of the action

narrative generates problems for the genre at the level of connotation. The Ripley persona also provides an interesting instance of the ways in which image-makers have dealt with the 'problem' of the action heroine, mobilising configurations of motherhood, for example.

By way of contrast, roles such as that played by Patsy Kensit as Rika in Lethal Weapon 2 (Richard Donner, 1989), to cite just one example amongst many, provide little for the actress to do but confirm the hero's heterosexuality. If the male body is to be a point of security, the hero a figure who can be relied on, then bodily integrity and heterosexuality in particular, need to be maintained within the action narrative. The figure of the woman as romantic interest performs, in this respect, a key narrative function. She both offers a point of differentiation from the hero and deflects attention from the homoeroticism surrounding male buddy relationships. In these terms the figure of the woman provides a space onto which a variety of desires and anxieties are displaced.

In Death Warrant (Daran Sarafian, 1990) Jean-Claude Van Damme plays Burke, an under cover cop in a maximum security jail. Cynthia Gibb plays Amanda Beckett, a lawyer who, posing as Burke's wife, provides a contact to the outside. The film enacts a complex male psycho-drama in which the prison narrative is framed by Burke's encounter with the

ghostly figure of 'The Sandman'. Rape is held up as a threat to Burke, who resists both the sexual violence of his cell-mate and the more seductive temptations of Jersey, a transsexual who lives in the prison's basement. At the same time, the narrative and cinematography insistently sexualises and commodifies the male body. Gay desire is primarily displaced onto a pathologised construction of blackness within the film, but seemingly further to allay the anxieties attendant on the male prison narrative the film includes a scene in which Amanda inexplicably visits Burke in a private trailer for an intimate love scene, which then fades out at the first kiss. This love scene follows an indicative set of sequences in which we cut from Burke being beaten up by the prison guards to a scene in which Amanda arrives at the prison and is sexually harassed by the same guards. In this case the woman functions as a figure where a displaced story of sexual desire - represented in terms of violence - can be voiced. In an earlier visit to the prison, Burke rebukes Amanda for not looking the part of an ordinary wife, indicating perhaps the extent to which she is out of place in this film.

Whilst the woman in the action narrative may operate as some kind of symbolic guarantee, a place for the fixing of difference and heterosexual desire, she is simultaneously rendered increasingly marginal. Unlike the active/passive division of labour discussed by Laura Mulvey in relation to

the classic Hollywood film, in which the male figure advances the narrative whilst 'woman' functions as spectacle (1989: 20), the male figure in the contemporary action film often seems to function in both capacities. He controls the action at the same time as he is offered up to the audience as sexual spectacle. Given the additional importance that images of same-sex friendship have as a source of visual and narrative pleasure within the action narrative, the woman as love interest is in many senses an uncomfortable figure. An hysterical figure who needs to be rescued or protected, the heroine is often played for comedy. Sometimes she is simply written out of the more intense action narrative altogether, as in First Blood. More often female characters are either raped or killed, or both, in order to provide a motivation for the hero's revenge. It is a cliché that the police hero has lost his wife or lover either before the film commences, as in Dirty Harry (Don Siegel, 1971) or Lethal Weapon (Richard Donner, 1987), or fairly soon after her appearance as love interest, as in Lethal Weapon 2.

In films like Rocky III and Kickboxer (Mark DiSalle, 1989) the figure of the woman mediates the sexual threat that the black or Asian villain represents to the white hero. Mr T plays Clubber Lang, a vicious challenger to Rocky's title in Rocky III. Lang challenges Rocky's virility, making sexual suggestions to wife Adrian/Talia Shire and taking

his title from him before the film's final confrontation, from which Rocky emerges triumphant once more. In the final fight from Kickboxer the Thai kickboxing champion, Tong Po, taunts Jean-Claude Van Damme with both having raped his girl Mylee and holding his paralysed brother Eric captive. Such functions for female characters are very much in line with traditional, even archaic, understandings of women's role within society.

As is perhaps already evident, the action film often operates as an almost exclusively male space, in which issues to do with sexuality and gendered identity can be worked out over the male body. In the role of threatened object action heroines are significant, if passive, narrative figures. This role can alternatively be played by a 'weak' male character, a figure who is also in need of the hero's protection. This kind of narrative dynamic operates, for example, in Lock Up (John Flynn, 1989), a film in which the status of threatened object is initially played by the young male convict that Stallone/Leone has befriended in the prison. His nickname, 'First Base', indicates something of the sexualised power relations structuring this friendship, implications not lost on the rest of the inmates at Gateway. Once First Base has been killed, it is Leone's girlfriend on the outside, Melissa, who once more assumes the role of the one who needs to be protected, as the narrative moves to its conclusion.

This much, in terms of the sexual organisation of narrative, is familiar, summarised in the image which Laura Mulvey invokes from myth of Andromeda tied to a rock awaiting rescue from Perseus. (3) If women are erased from the action, if not the mise-en-scene, of the action narrative, what place does this leave for female audiences? I do not want to argue that this textual marginality results in an unproblematic erasure of female audiences, since one of the pleasures of the cinema is precisely that it offers a space in which the ambiguities of identities and desires are played out. This blurring of categories is crucial to understanding the play of femininity and masculinity over the bodies of male and female characters, a process that has been inflected significantly in the action cinema of recent years in which the body is brought so much to the fore. Weakness, vulnerability is expressed through the mobilisation of traits associated with femininity, most particularly a softness or lack of definition which might allow the body to be fatally penetrated. It is in these terms that the scars and wounds which mark the body of the suffering male hero are significant. The muscular male body functions as a sort of armour - it is sculpted and worked on - which is repeatedly breached, an understanding expressed in the image of Achilles heel, a body with one point of physical vulnerability which betrays the otherwise invincible warrior, and which itself becomes intensely vulnerable. (4)

Within the framework of psychoanalysis, such images could be interpreted in relation to the concept of castration, as a dramatising of the pleasures of empowerment and the fear of powerlessness. The narrative dynamic that operates in relationship to the female body in the action cinema is constructed within a similar set of terms. Considered within a psychoanalytic framework women, of course, have less to loose. If a symbolic transgression is enacted through the feminisation and penetration of the male body, a symbolic transgression enacted over the woman's body emphasises instead the ways in which her body is rendered impenetrable, 'masculine'. It is the play of such qualities in Alien that allows the elaboration of a distinction between the two female crew members - Ripley, who survives, and Lambert, who does not. Ripley's death, in the final film of the trilogy, is represented in terms of a spectacular destruction of bodily integrity. As she throws herself into the furnace an alien is 'born' from her stomach. Yet even as her body is torn apart, she is given the strength to hold herself together.

As the construction of the action heroine through images of physical hardness makes clear, the connotations of the term 'heroine' in the Hollywood action cinema have been sharply shifted in recent years. By the beginning of the 1990^s a range of images of active heroines had begun to emerge, figures such as Susan Sarandon and Geena Davies in Ridley

Scott's Thelma and Louise, Linda Hamilton in a muscular reprise of her role as Sarah Connor in Terminator 2 and Jodie Foster as aspiring FBI agent Clarice Starling in The Silence of the Lambs (Jonathon Demme, 1990). Such roles have begun to sketch out new narrative possibilities for women in the Hollywood action cinema so that 'heroine' no longer necessarily signifies passivity. Thus the romantic interest in Lethal Weapon 3 (Richard Donner, 1992), internal affairs investigator Lorna Cole/Rene Russo, is also a martial arts expert. She is wounded but alive at the end of the film. These films represent a significant inflection of the action cinema's articulation of gender. These images also emerge from existing traditions, a history that is briefly traced below.

The 'Independent Heroine' as Stereotype

During the 1970s, always eager to capitalise on the emergence of new markets, Hollywood sought to respond to the women's movement in a variety of ways. Films such as Klute (Alan J Pakula, 1971) and Julia (Fred Zinnemaann, 1977), which both starred Jane Fonda have been seen as attempts to redefine existing types and traditions of representation, in order to include the figure of the 'independent heroine'. (5) These films centre around the stories of women who are independent of men, who are sexually free and who, to an extent, determine their own lives. Forming, in retrospect, a recognisable cycle these

films are also primarily concerned with detailing the problems faced by the independent woman in achieving her independence. Thus the problematic aspects of the 'independent woman's' narrative is repeatedly foregrounded. These films can be seen to respond to feminist demands for less stereotypical roles for women, since they offer more developed character parts, even if retrospectively they can be seen to have contributed to a recognisable stereotype themselves. They offer, that is, a new, or at least revised stereotype.

In a related development American television produced such successful series as Charlie's Angels, Policewoman and Wonderwoman during the same period. (6) These television series all placed women at the centre of the police narrative, though signalling in a variety of ways uncertainties about such a shift. Thus the three investigators who are 'Charlie's Angels' were oddly positioned as both fashion plates and action heroines. Whilst Angie Dickinson, the star of Policewoman and already a well-established film performer, played what was a more sober or 'dramatic' role, these series often emphasised the glamorous sexuality of the heroines, an emphasis which sat uneasily with action sequences.

What was implicit in a series like Charlie's Angels, that these characters were drawn from a stylised cartoon or

comic strip tradition, was made explicit in the televising of Wonderwoman with ex-Miss World Lynda Carter in the title role. The cult British television series of the 1960s The Avengers had mobilised such fantasy traditions, out of pop art, in the leather-clad, tough, fighting heroines played by Honor Blackman and Diana Rigg. (7) In the cinema, films like Barbarella (Roger Vadim, 1967) provide antecedents for these superheroines of the 1970s and for more recent epics such as Red Sonja and Conan the Destroyer (Richard Fleischer, 1984). These latter films conjure up a fantasy world in which to place the woman warrior, whilst also drawing on camp comedy to undermine the earnest poses of the performers. In crude terms, if images of men have often needed to compensate for the sexual presentation of the hero's body through emphasising his activity, then images of women seem to need to compensate for the figure of the active heroine by emphasising her sexuality, her availability within traditional feminine terms. Hence the rather conventional coding of glamour around characters such as Charlie's Angels. This anxiety also suggests the complex problems of coding posed by the more recent emergence of the muscular action heroine, a figure who is discussed in detail in chapter seven.

In responding to feminism, image-makers sought to present women as active and as powerful, mobilising already-existing types and conventions, images that were an

established part of popular culture, such as the leather-clad dominatrix. That producers reached for such conventions convinced many hostile critics that these representations were cynically exploitative, and were directed at male rather than female audiences. The complex relationship between feminist criticism and images of the action heroine is also discussed further in chapter seven. Here it is important to note that the combination of conventionally masculine and feminine elements in the gendered images of the 1970s posed all sorts of iconographic problems for television producers and filmmakers. Producers often sought to allay, if not resolve, the uncertainties posed by the action heroine through either the sexualisation of her persona or the use of comedy, or both.

The production history of a television series like Cagney and Lacey is a case in point. Whilst this series became a rallying point of 'quality' television for many feminist critics and audiences of the 1980s, it was initially conceived as something quite different, during the 1970s. Barbara Avedon and Barbara Corday created the characters as a response to the arguments presented in Molly Haskell's book From Reverence to Rape, first published in 1974. Haskell had argued that women had been excluded from Hollywood in the 1970s in favour of the 'immature' and unthreatening relationships seen in male buddy movies. The

producers got the idea of producing a female buddy movie, with the initial plot functioning as a spoof that had Cagney and Lacey investigating a 'Godmother' figure who runs a criminal operation involving male prostitutes and female clients. (8)

The kind of comic role reversal operating here is reminiscent of the polarised 'battle of the sexes' rhetoric through which gender relations were popularly reported during the 1970s. The militancy ascribed to the women's movement can be seen as, in some senses, an extension of such rhetoric. This rhetoric and the images to which it gave rise is part and parcel of an attempt to insist on the retention of a binary understanding of gendered identity - a battle between two sides - which finds its contemporary manifestation in the popular understanding of human nature as made up of feminine and masculine 'sides'.

The strategy of role reversal and the stereotype of the independent heroine are very much of the seventies in expressing a need to explain away the actions of the heroine and to reassert her femininity, at the same time as the transgression of femininity involved in these actions are offered as pleasurable. This may be achieved through comedy or through narrative justifications which explain the 'accident of fate' by which the heroine occupies her position, if not the rather obvious fact that she is more

than able to carry out the role asked of her. A common device has the heroine explicitly taking over her father's role after his untimely death. In terms of the fantastic powers traditionally ascribed to the heroes and heroines of action narratives, such a need to explain can be self-defeating. It is perhaps such factors that have led to the frequent repetition of rape-revenge narratives as a way of producing appropriate motivation for an active heroine in films such as Sudden Impact (Clint Eastwood, 1983), Ms 45/Angel of Vengeance (Abel Ferrara, 1980) or I Spit on Your Grave (Meir Zarchi, 1978). (9) The ideological construction operating here retains an understanding of the heroine as a vulnerable figure alongside her move into action, into a narrative of revenge. Indeed the two are bound up together. (10)

Black Action Films and the 'Superwoman'

American production companies were quick to respond to the success of Hong Kong action pictures with black audiences in the 1970s. Black Belt Jones (Robert Clouse, 1973), a Warner Bros./Shaw Brothers co-production represents a typical response to this phenomenon, casting martial arts star Jim Kelly, who had just appeared alongside Bruce Lee in Enter the Dragon (Robert Clouse, 1973), in the title role. The film also cast Gloria Hendry in the role of Sidney, a character who exemplifies the figure of the black fighting heroine who emerged as a recognisable stereotype

in a series of low-budget American action films of the 1970s. Bogle dubs these women 'macho goddesses', arguing that they 'answered a multitude of needs and were a hybrid of stereotypes, part buck/part mammy/part mulatto' (Bogle 1991: 251). Echoing the devices mobilised in television series like Charlie's Angels, narratives featuring the black female fighter resort to both the use of comedy and the fetishistic representation of female power. Thus whilst Sidney is revealed to be a fighter skilled in karate, this is, variously, a source of comedy or of a certain novelty value. Sidney is only half-dressed when she is fighting alongside Kelly in the film's final confrontation with the mob, a semi-comic scene which takes place amongst a deluge of soap suds.

Bogle's phrase 'macho goddesses' acknowledges the complex blend of masculine and feminine elements at work in this stereotype. It is worth exploring this hybridity a little further since it is in part the blackness of these heroines which opens up, through stereotypical notions of black animality, the production of an aggressive female heroine within existing traditions of representation. Black female stars who have played action roles, such as Tamara Dobson, Pam Grier and Grace Jones, often function as 'exotic' creatures within the narrative. For her role as Zula in Conan the Destroyer Grace Jones is literally given a tail. The meaning of the emphasis placed on animality in Grace

Jones' film roles is, however, complexly linked to the ways in which her image itself has addressed the stereotypical physicality and sexuality attributed to the black woman. The complex orchestration of signification involved in Jones' performances in film, in music video and as a singer, involves the simultaneous assertion of and challenge to the kinds of racist fantasies posed by Jean-Paul Goude's construction of her as a caged animal. (11)

The 'macho' aspects of the black action heroine - her ability to fight, her self-confidence, even arrogance - are bound up in an aggressive assertion of her sexuality. Simultaneously it is this same stereotypical attribution of sexuality to the black woman which generates anxiety around her representation.

Black Belt Jones transfers the martial arts school-based scenario of many classic Hong Kong narratives to the United States, combining this with a gangster narrative. (12) The film's martial arts school, with which Kelly's character is involved, is run by Pops, who is wanted by the mob. After Pops has been murdered his daughter Sidney arrives to investigate his death. Both beautiful and self-assured, Sidney causes a stir in her search for information, storming into a mob bar where she takes on and beats all the men there, revealing her own karate skills. The bar room showdown is a stock scene of the action narrative, featuring a well-established set of codes. These codes can

be seen at work in both Hollywood and Italian westerns, science-fiction films and the Hong Kong martial arts films amongst others. There are bar room confrontations in action films as diverse as Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977), 48 Hours (Walter Hill, 1982), Near Dark and Terminator 2. What does this scenario signify, and how has it been coded through gender and race? The bar room showdown offers a conflict violently staged in a public space. The protagonists self-consciously strike poses, acting out stylised roles, in their desire to either instigate or avoid conflict. In the action cinema, such scenes are showpieces for the ritualised performance of a tough masculinity. Typically, the hero does not appear to be threatening, whilst his arrogant antagonists clearly believe they have the upper hand. We, on the other hand, know, or at least suspect, the actual strength of the hero. Such generic moments play off conventional expectations, reminding us that appearances can be deceptive. The hero may seem weak, ineffectual or outnumbered, but ultimately he will overcome his opponents.

Given that the bar room has tended to be a male space - almost exclusively in American cinema - then action films like Black Belt Jones can successfully make dramatic tension from the challenge represented by a woman's entry into this space. Developed as a dramatisation of male conflict, such conventional narrative moments are reworked

around a female protagonist in the 1970^s action film. The antagonists assume the heroine is unable to fight but she is actually able to outclass her male opponents. Variants on such scenes, found in films like China O'Brien (Robert Clouse, 1988) and Above the Law (Cory Yuen, 1986), use comic elements at the same time as they draw on established modes for the representation of conflict. In however tangled and awkward a way these narratives do seek, through the inclusion of the female fighter, to acknowledgement the shifting ideas bound up in the contemporary black and women's movements. This is largely framed through humour as when, after Black Belt Jones tells Sidney to stay home and do the dishes, she promptly shoots the crockery, pronouncing 'they're done'. Such comic moments represent an explicit address to and acknowledgement of feminist concerns at the same time as they signal the anxieties generated by the figure of the action heroine.

In a similar vein ex-model Tamara Dobson played Cleopatra Jones, a glamorous government agent cast in the James Bond tradition, in two Warner Bros/Shaw Brothers co-productions. The films use a role reversal device which opposes Jones to a female arch-villain. Stella Stevens plays the villainous Dragon Lady in the sequel Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold (Chuck Bail, 1975). Whilst these films form part of a history of action heroines in western cinema, such roles have been limited until relatively recently to either the

television series or to low budget film production. Bogle makes a familiar assessment when judging Pam Grier's movies as 'trash' saved only by her 'grit' (Bogle 1991: 252).

Such a judgement expresses both the pleasure and the disappointments to be found in these films. The production teams at work on films such as Cleopatra Jones (Jack Starrett, 1973) and Black Belt Jones rarely demonstrate an ability to work with and productively employ the complex history of conventions which surround the cinematic representation of black women. More often than not, her presence is treated as a joke.

These conventions are worked through and played with in a more recent film, Nico/Above the Law (Andrew Davis, 1988) in which Pam Grier plays Delores Jackson, Steven Seagal's cop partner. We are told that Jackson has only a limited time to serve as she is moving to the District Attorney's department, a clue which sets her up in the role of expendable sidekick, a loved character who will die in order to cement the hero's desire for revenge. Imminent retirement or transfer only increases the tension and the danger surrounding sidekick characters in the genre. Indeed the film plays this scenario out rather self-consciously as Jackson is dramatically gunned down, only to reveal later that she was wearing a bullet-proof vest so that she survives to the end of the film. The survival of Grier's character can be set against a long history of

narrative sacrifice on the part of the black sidekicks, male and female, of Hollywood cinema.

Women in the Martial Arts Film

Films such as Black Belt Jones and Cleopatra Jones in the 1970s, or Nico in the 1980s, form part of a martial arts tradition in American film production either influenced by the work of Hong Kong studios, or actually initiated as co-productions by American and Hong Kong companies. During the 1970s Hong Kong films, including those which showcased female fighters, had a significant commercial success in the west. 'Exotic' women gifted in equally 'exotic' forms of the martial arts had featured in such 1960s and 1970s products as the James Bond films. In the early 1970s Hong Kong films starring female performers, with Angela Mao Ying the most publicised, began to be distributed in the west. As Verina Glaessner points out it was assumed at the time that her films 'were an exotic response to the growing influence of the Women's Liberation Movement' (Glaessner 1974: 74). Glaessner by contrast locates these films within longstanding Chinese and Japanese cinematic traditions of swordplay films. In the west however, where some women had already begun to look to forms like karate for a method of self-defence, it was perhaps inevitable that the films would be popularly read in terms of the women's movement.

The differences between the role of the female fighter in American and Hong Kong traditions are made apparent in the role given to Angela Mao Ying in Enter the Dragon, the Warner Bros. film which sought to package Chinese star Bruce Lee for both western audiences as well as existing Asian markets. There is a significant attempt at redefinition of the Bruce Lee persona at work in this film. This involves the construction of Lee as an asexual figure in the service of the British authorities. Jim Kelly, playing a stereotypical black 'stud' bears the burden of the film's discourse about race, dying before the end of the film. The operations performed around the Lee persona in this film draw from a history of western representations of Chinese men as feminised. A comparable set of negotiations operate in a smaller way around the figure of Angela Mao, who appears briefly as Lee's sister in an early flashback sequence. She is pursued by a gang and, finally cornered, kills herself. We see the suicide from her point of view as a shard of glass is brought towards the camera. For Glaessner this is

a curious scene in which the suicide is at odds with the whole conception of the fight hero or heroine in Chinese films - everyone knows he or she would have gone down fighting (Glaessner 1974: 80-1).

The flashback allows only a contained showcasing of Mao Ying's fighting skill, just as the film as a whole attempts to contain or redefine the figure of Bruce Lee. The mapping of western concerns about the representation of the

active heroine onto the fighting fantasies of Hong Kong cinema are indicative here of the anxieties at work in films of this type. The sequence, in its representation of a lone woman chased by a group of men, invokes sexual violence, a theme which has had a central narrative and ideological significance within the western action cinema. (13) This once again returns us to the centrality of rape within action narratives as a justification for female violence.

Cynthia Rothrock, who began her film career in Hong Kong, has repeatedly been described as an unlikely action heroine. My discussion centres on three of her films which have been quite widely available in the west through the video market: Above the Law and the two American China O'Brien films. Rothrock has become an important figure on the video martial arts scene and has received publicity owing to both her talent and the novelty attached to the fact that she is a white woman working in a genre associated with white men in the west and Chinese performers in Hong Kong. In Above the Law Rothrock plays the part of a tough Hong Kong cop. The film follows hero Jason Chan/Yuen Biao's decision to turn vigilante, rejecting a career in the law after his mentor has been assassinated and the corruption of the system has become transparent. Rothrock vows to capture him though she ultimately uncovers the corruption of her police chief

boss, and helps the hero. Rothrock has some spectacular fights in the film, including a sequence in which she goes into a gaming house and secures four men to a chair with one set of handcuffs. The different conventions and traditions of the Hong Kong cinema allows all sorts of characters, rather than just the major protagonists, to be fighters, a context in which Rothrock's appearance does not seem to require the kinds of narrative explanation so insistently worked through in her American films.

The two China O'Brien films cast Rothrock as Lori 'China' O'Brien, a police officer in an (unspecified) American city. When she accidentally kills a child she gives up her badge and gun, taking off in a cross-country drive back to her small home town. China finds her sheriff father in the midst of a losing battle with a corrupt judiciary and the town in a state of near anarchy. When both her father and his deputy are killed, China runs for Sheriff, gets elected to office and defeats the villains. The film offers set pieces such as a bar room showdown in which China performs sidekicks whilst wearing shoes with stiletto heels. In one of the few moments in either film explicitly to draw attention to the potential problems posed by Rothrock's femaleness, she sighs in China O'Brien 2 (Robert Clouse, 1989) that "It's tough sometimes - being a woman". Her remark follows the hysterical insults of an unreliable male character who screams at her "I bet you enjoy beating up on

men". It is important that China's femaleness be unthreatening to the symbolic world of the film, so that she can come to represent law and order in small town America. At a town celebration at the beginning of China O'Brien 2, she is awarded a plaque for her services to the community and hailed as a great sheriff - 'Not bad looking either' adds a member of the audience. This is typical of the ways in which the film keeps negotiating the role of a female sheriff. Accompanied by her ex-special forces boyfriend and her sidekick Dakota, China's familiarity with the town and the people in it is stressed in both films.

In the language of the trailers, China is 'a sheriff without a gun, a daughter without a father' and 'a woman without fear'. Such images clearly position China as her father's daughter, and her father is constantly invoked as a presence, even after his death. She is a figure who is marked as 'in-between' or 'not-quite'. Her name brings together the imputed exoticism of the martial arts and the East ('China') with her father's name, that of a white, Irish-American family (O'Brien). The figure of the father operates as legitimation for China's transgression in taking on the job of sheriff. Similarly the setting of the action in a small town with figures such as Chester (the town drunk) who seem to be taken directly from a traditional Hollywood western, situates China's position of power within a limited space. It is in the big city that

she hands over her gun, seemingly resigning from law enforcement. Within Hollywood's symbolic system possession of a gun is a potent symbol of power, partly drawing from an American context in which the freedom to bear arms is a right of the citizen.

The Heroine as Sidekick

The centrality of the role played by Julia Nickson as Co Bao in Rambo was rarely discussed in commentaries on the film. A Vietnamese agent who is Rambo's contact on his secret return to the country, Co escorts Rambo to the supposedly deserted prison camp he has been assigned to investigate, explaining that her career as a guerilla has followed from the death of her father. Like China O'Brien then, Co has taken on her father's role, remaining a dutiful daughter at the same time as she represents a powerful female figure who seems to refuse conventional femininity. Shocked to find American POWs in the camp, Co aids Rambo's escape, taking another prisoner along as evidence. They separate in time for Co to see Rambo abandoned by an American rescue helicopter. Shots of her in close-up are intercut with the shots of Rambo's capture so that, within the film, she becomes the audience for his suffering. Co proceeds to disguise herself as a village prostitute, a figure we have seen visiting the camp earlier, rescuing Rambo from his captors. In an early conversation about their roles and motives in the conflict

Rambo tells Co that he has been sent on this mission since he is expendable. At their first parting she assures him that this is not so and demonstrates this by coming back for him. The film contrasts the hero's betrayal by the American military machine with Co's loyalty. At this point in the film the relationship between the two characters shifts from that of comrades in arms to romance. In a soft focus scene they kiss and talk of going to America together. This, it seems, is a little too transgressive for the film to deal with. Thus, when Co stands up moments later, she is gunned down and Rambo sets out to avenge her death.

Through her death Co's active character is transformed into a familiar, passive narrative function, that of lost object to be avenged. Yet the inflection of this role in performances such as Nickson's has significantly re-styled the woman-as-romantic-interest as an action heroine. At the same time it is clear that the roles are incompatible, unable to exist simultaneously. Where this does happen, as in Total Recall (Paul Verhoeven, 1990), it is in the context of a narrative which is centrally about the instability of identity and the uncertainty of appearances. (14) Co's death seals the narrative logic of Rambo, which cannot reconcile its outsider rhetoric with the positioning of the hero in terms of heterosexual romance or even within a projected return to America. The film cannot

find a place for either the muscular hero, or the kind of woman Co signifies, within its schema of America. The action heroine here is as placeless a figure as the hero, though in a rather different way, since she is often also rendered marginal by the narrative of the film, literally sacrificed. This difficult position is also made evident in Terminator 2. After her transformation into an action heroine through the course of the first film Sarah Connor has, in the narrative time that has elapsed, been separated from her son and we find her incarcerated in an insane asylum where she works out and plots her escape. Images of the heroine as mother, an image which emphasises her womanhood, come into conflict with images of the fighting action heroine who is defined as insane, without a place in mainstream American society.

In understanding this conflict of images we can look to a longer tradition of representation. Distinct from the women who function as the hero's love interest and little else, are the female sidekicks who accompany the hero on his travels. In contrast to Julia Nickson's role in Rambo, these women are often comic characters, generating laughs through a reversal of the conventions of femininity. The character played by Karen Allen in Raiders of the Lost Ark (Steven Spielberg, 1981) is cast in this vein, a woman who can drink men under the table. Grace Jones' role as May Day in the James Bond film, A View to A Kill (John Glen,

1985) is indicative of the crudity of this kind of secondary role. As villain Christopher Walken's sidekick, Jones performs a parody of her own sexualised public persona. The film makes jokes about her sexuality with her 'seducing' Roger Moore as James Bond and aggressively climbing on top of him.

A more sustained sidekick role is that played by Nancy Allen as Lewis in RoboCop (Paul Verhoeven, 1987) and RoboCop 2 (Irvin Kershner, 1990). (15) Allen is introduced through Murphy's eyes in the first few minutes of RoboCop, violently hitting a suspect she has brought into the police station. As Murphy's partner, Lewis looks helplessly on whilst his body is literally blown to pieces. As in Rambo, the woman here provides an audience for the hero's suffering, his powerlessness emphasised by her gaze. Later it is Lewis who recognises the human traits that remain after Murphy's transformation into a cyborg, and it is she who helps him to take his revenge. In the second film Lewis and RoboCop are still partners, with her tough cop persona played off against his literal metallic toughness. She knows that Murphy has been re-programmed by the company when he compliments her on her appearance and calls her by her first name. For Murphy to acknowledge Lewis's difference signals clearly to her, and to us, that something is wrong.

That the conventions of courtesy are so blatantly^a misplaced in the genre may indicate something about the important symbolic role that the female sidekick has within the action cinema. Like the black buddy who is discussed further in chapter two, she provides a point of differentiation, emphasising the masculine identity of the male hero. Yet at the same time the female sidekick problematises, to an extent, that same masculine identity which the hero embodies - since she is witness to his failings. The use of comedy and the representation of suffering, as in Rambo or RoboCop, present two polarised forms for the mediation of anxieties to do with gendered identity.

In Commando (Mark L. Lester, 1985) Matrix/Schwarzenegger teams up with Cindy, an air hostess, played by Rae Dawn Chong. He forces her to help him, despite her protests that she has 'a 7.30 advanced karate class'. After she has rescued him by demolishing a police truck with a rocket launcher, Matrix asks her "Where did you learn to do that?". She provides the punchline: "I read the instructions". As with so much of the humour derived from action heroines, this short sequence plays on a joke about how it is possible to learn the skills and qualities which go to make up the supposedly natural masculine strength of the hero. This tension is further exemplified in the Schwarzenegger film Total Recall (Paul Verhoeven, 1990) in

which we see the hero specify his ideal heroine, represented by Melina. Total Recall offers hero Quaid/Schwarzenegger a choice between two women, the wife he is 'placed' with by the 'agency' and Melina, whom he dreams of. In both cases these women are, like the hero, very definitely constructions, so that at key points in the development of the narrative we are left unsure as to whether these women, indeed the whole 'world' in which the action takes place, are 'real' or fantasised.

'Strong Women': Comic Book Heroines

The mythological or fantasy narrative situates exaggerated physical types, often derived from comic books, within imaginary locations. Accompanying the boldly drawn physical characteristics of the heroes and heroines are clear judgements between good and evil - there are few moral grey areas. The film of the cartoon series Masters of the Universe (Gary Goddard, 1987) represents an extreme version of this stylised battle, pitting Dolph Lundgren as He-Man against arch-villain Skeletor and Meg Foster, who plays his right-hand woman, Evil Lynn. Inevitably in the transfer of a cartoon to the screen, comic strands are interwoven with the action of these narratives, indeed they are part and parcel of the general muscular excess. Humour is derived from the juxtaposition of the barely clad heroes and heroines (so explicitly offered as sexual spectacle) with the intense earnestness of the mock mythologies

constructed for these fantasy worlds. There is a doubleness operating in these films around a tacit acknowledgement of the hilarity with which the narratives, which take themselves seriously, are actually received. Minor characters constantly comment on the action, acting to undercut the overblown figures of the heroes and heroines.

In Conan the Destroyer Arnold Schwarzenegger's Conan is persuaded to undertake a journey with the young princess Jehnna. She is to fetch a crystal which will unlock a secret mystical power. Her virginity is supposed to give Jehnna a magical power, but at the same time she is clearly constructed in terms of the modern teenager, asking Grace Jones' character for advice on how to get a man. The characters of Jehnna and Jones as Zula are consistently opposed by the film through the sexualised terms of innocence and experience. Whilst Jehnna is blonde, white and clothed, Zula is black and near-naked, so that the mythicised notions of sexual innocence and experience are mapped onto racial constructions of female sexuality, as well as figures of dominance and subservience, through these two figures. Red Sonja followed on from the Conan films, casting Brigitte Nielsen in the title role and Arnold Schwarzenegger as Kalidor. The ideological figures of virginity and magic are once more important to the narrative. At the beginning of the film Sonja wakes from a

daze to find a ghostly figure who informs her, and us, of the events that will trigger her narrative search for revenge. We learn that Sonja had rejected the sexual advances of evil queen Gedren, scarring her face, which Gedren covers with a mask for much of the film. Though Gedren orders the slaughter of her family, Sonja survives and is given a magical power which makes her a strong swordswoman.

Despite an unsuccessful cinematic release, Red Sonja has become a cult curiosity on the video market. It is also one of the few action-based films to explicitly invoke lesbianism - though it is as a dreadful threat. (16) By way of contrast, the homoeroticism surrounding male action stars is a constant presence, acknowledged and played with by films which simultaneously deploy an anxious disavowal of gay desire. The prison settings of films such as Death Warrant, Lock Up and Tango and Cash (Andrei Konchalovsky, 1989) are used as spaces in which to express images of homosexuality in terms of the threat of violent rape. Sigourney Weaver's isolation as the only woman in the all-male prison setting of Alien 3 can be contrasted to such images. That lesbian desire, personified in the figure of the evil queen, is made explicit in Red Sonja represents the voicing of an often unspoken, if central, term in discourses of the action heroine. China O'Brien 2 also includes glimpses of a recognisable lesbian stereotype in

the policewoman, Lucille, who handles the phones at the station. The relationship between the two protagonists of Thelma and Louise invokes in more complex ways images of, and associated with, lesbianism - country music, the cowgirl look, the two women's final kiss, the sub-genre of the buddy road movie itself. Thelma and Louise was unproblematically billed as a 'lesbian film' when shown at a recent women's event in London. Which is merely to assert that there is a space for such identifications within action-based films like this, even if they do not explicitly acknowledge their gay audiences. (17)

The uncertainties which surround the action heroine can be usefully explored in relation to the comic aspects of mythological narratives, such as Red Sonja. Recourse to comedy is a more general feature of the action cinema at moments of symbolic tension. The figure of the hero as wise-guy, for example, can be understood in these terms. The wise-guy hero is always ready with a witticism which may catch his opponents off guard. Fatal Beauty, discussed below, casts Whoopi Goldberg as a 'wise-guy', drawing on her talents as a stand-up comedian. An analysis of the ideological terms at work in a film like Red Sonja is not difficult - the film follows Sonja's journey to a 'normal' sexual identity, or at the very least the rejection of lesbian desire. After the initial 'threat' of lesbianism, Sonja becomes a masculinised swordswoman who refuses

Kalidor/Schwarzengger until he can beat her in a 'fair fight'. The final image of the film has the camera pulling away from the two who embrace only after they have begun to fight yet again, since he has in turn insisted that Sonja beat him in a sword fight. The comedy and the excess, which permeate the film, also systematically call into question the very terms deployed - the 'normal' sexual identity to which Sonja is led. The body, and in particular the muscular body, is very much to the fore in these narratives - hence the minimal clothes of the heroes and heroines of these fantasy narratives.

The comic/cartoon origins of figures such as He-Man and Conan allow them to exist in close relationship to and, in some senses, to one side of the conventional standards of social behaviour. I refer here to the sense in which exaggeration so easily crosses over into parody. Clearly the big-breasted or muscular women found in comic strips are fantasy figures. Yet alongside their exaggerated sexual characteristics, these heroines have exaggerated physical power, in swordplay or marksmanship, a strength which marks them as transgressive, as perverse. (18) As much as anything else, the tone of a film like Red Sonja is indicative of the play of elements which cannot be understood through an ideological analysis based on narrative structure alone - Sonja's journey to a 'normal' sexuality. The fact that the film visually defines this

normalcy through images of Sonja's sword fights with Arnold Schwarzenegger, or that viewers may well be aware of the qualifications posed by both Nielson's star image and the tabloid gossip surrounding her, indicates a possibility of reading the film differently. There are, that is, a variety of elements, both textual and extra-textual, which may operate to undermine the narrative assertion of heterosexuality. (19)

These qualifications make the basic point that an experience of cinema is not limited to the duration, or content of a particular film, since texts are contextualised in a variety of different ways by other mass media, and by the more immediate and diverse ways in which different groups appropriate images from those media. Such an understanding has been crucial to a variety of critical discussions of popular pleasure. (20) Instead of seeing the protagonists of action cinema emerging as powerful and meaningful figures 'despite' the fictions in which they are mobilised, it is also important to think about what the pleasures of those fictions might be. Such pleasures might explicitly be seen to include the dramatisation of the struggle to become powerful in difficult circumstances.

At a textual level it is also possible to argue that the action film is a form which puts into question the terms of a gendered representation of power. In many senses action

narratives centred on the male hero are to do with a refusal to make the journey to a 'normal' sexuality, a refusal to 'grow up' within an oedipal trajectory in which growing up involves the assumption of authority and the position of the father. The significance of this drama is developed further in later chapters. The transgressive heroine of action narratives is involved in a rather different scenario. In her perversity - her turning away from the father - she is nonetheless thoroughly oedipalised. Heroines like China O'Brien are functioning quite explicitly for their fathers. We have seen the emergence of a generation of action heroines who are positioned in a very close relationship to the law. China is a sheriff whilst in Blue Steel Jamie Lee Curtis plays a uniformed cop, and in Silence of the Lambs Jodie Foster's character is an aspiring FBI agent.

These figures suggest that the heroine's perversity, in assuming the powerful and threatening role of the phallic woman, involves a very different relationship to the law than that which typifies the outsider hero. He is able both to refuse and embody phallic power. These are complex questions however, in which it is not possible to generalise a schema for the action cinema as a whole - both Thelma and Louise and the Alien films, which I have cited together here, propose a different set of terms for understanding the figure of the action heroine.

Nonetheless it is possible to signal these themes as defining the terrain on which the genre operates.

Whoopi Goldberg: 'Fatal Beauty'

The casting of Whoopi Goldberg as the star of an action film like Fatal Beauty provides an indicative example of the contradictory demands of picturing difference within the Hollywood system. Goldberg plays Detective Rita Rizzoli, a narcotics officer with a personal mission against drugs. She is clearly a representative of the law, a casting which in terms of the history of representations of black women in Hollywood cinema, triggers something of a crisis of coding.

Goldberg herself has played a variety of roles in film and television. The mysticism implicit in her Star Trek role was made explicit in her casting as a (phoney) medium in the hugely successful romance Ghost (Jerry Zucker, 1990). Contrasting the success of Oprah Winfrey with Whoopi Goldberg's career, Michele Wallace points to Hollywood's difficulty in

coming up with a credible storyline for a black female comedian with dreadlocks, which will commodify racial 'marginality' but isn't racist enough to produce a boycott of the theatre (Wallace 1990: 219).

Ghost seems to have performed this operation quite exactly, playing on mythicised notions of racial difference. (21)

In thinking about Fatal Beauty there are then a general set of issues about the position of black women in Hollywood, as well as the specificity of the action narrative, to consider. If Goldberg is difficult for Hollywood to cast at all, why position her in a genre already anxious in terms of gendered identity? Though racial and gendered discourses are not interchangeable, they are interlocked in their sexualisation of relations of power. The troubling body is fetishised and thus, provisionally, made safe. (22) The figure of the action heroine then, raises a similar set of issues to that of the black hero in the action narrative. How can the over-determined sexual stereotypes, through which both women and blackness have been coded in the cinema, be transformed in order to produce a stable black or female figure around whom the fiction can be centred?

Blackness is understood within Hollywood's symbolic order in terms of marginality and criminality. This criminality has been most often expressed in action narratives of recent years not through sexualised images, but through the ideologically loaded figure of drugs. Drugs have emerged as a key signifier in a variety of American discourses over the last fifteen years. Representing the 'enemy within', drugs offer a way of speaking about the circulation of capital and relations of dependency and power. Drugs have also represented a key part of American political

discourse, with George Bush's declaration of a war on drugs ultimately used to legitimate such acts as the invasion of Panama. For a brief period in the mid-1980s Hollywood produced narratives focussing on wealthy white drug users. Images of drug use signify corruption in RoboCop. By and large though the association between drugs and blackness, often cast in terms of a 'foreign' element invading the country, has been increasingly invoked in American representations of recent years.

In Fatal Beauty we learn that Rizzoli was once a drug user and that she bears a burden of guilt since her drug use led to the death of her child. Thus Rizzoli is the bad mother struggling to make up for her transgression. Her construction as a maternal figure allows her to be caring, whilst also legitimating her extreme use of violence. The one moment in which she comes to blows with another woman is when she strikes a rich white woman who is seemingly indifferent to her son's drug use. The lost object that Rizzoli seeks to avenge is her own child, rather than the love interest sacrificed for the male hero's quest. The rape/revenge narrative is triggered by a violation of the woman's body - events which generate a violence directed at the attacker. In Fatal Beauty the logic of Rizzoli's revenge must in part be directed against herself. This tortuous logic stems from the difficulty of finding a term against which Rizzoli can be defined. Who, or what, can be

constructed as the black woman's Other? (23) This is, of course, precisely where the figure of drugs is introduced.

Fatal Beauty ends up by almost completely isolating Goldberg's character. The few scenes in which Rizzoli and co-star Sam Elliott have a flirtatious relationship come as a relief within a film in which she is so persistently isolated within shot and abused, both physically and verbally, by both crooks and police colleagues. The two join forces and repeatedly rescuing each other. Owing to supposed audience hostility a love scene between the two was cut from the film, a rewrite that Donald Bogle takes to indicate the problems surrounding the 'very idea of Whoopi Goldberg as a romantic film personality'. For Bogle, by 'throwing her into male-oriented action films the industry prevented women from being able to identify fully with Goldberg' (Bogle 1991: 298).

Whilst Fatal Beauty seems uncomfortable with its own project in many ways, the notion of the 'male-oriented action picture' invoked by Bogle is deeply problematic, not least because the emergence of action heroines into the mainstream has necessarily redefined the articulation of gendered identity in the action film. If the film seeks to prevent identification with Goldberg's character, as Bogle suggests, this is not a function of the genre. Bogle also draws attention to the way in which Rizzoli is rigorously

defeminised, if not desexed by the film such that her dress 'in oversized clothes or sneakers' suggests a view of her 'as an asexual creature from another universe' (Bogle 1991: 298). Indeed much is made of Rizzoli's clothes in Fatal Beauty, in which she oscillates between an outrageous prostitute's outfit and her off-duty leisure clothes. Is not this reluctance to make Rizzoli a sexual character strange in relation to the over-sexualised image of the black woman produced in Hollywood and elsewhere in western culture? Goldberg's image in the film as both a hyper-sexualised and a de-sexualised cop is of course precisely related to this history of representation in which discourses of sexuality have been mapped onto the black female body.

Karen Alexander, in her discussion of black female stars, cites Goldberg's comment on the cut love scene that if Elliott 'had put some money on the bedside table the next morning, the scene would have been acceptable' (in Gledhill (ed) 1991: 53). Goldberg's comment highlights her perception that black women are generally only permitted to be sexual within the Hollywood film when this is framed by a discourse of prostitution. The black woman can seemingly exist only as a commodity on the screen, not as a desiring subject. Yet for Goldberg to actually play a prostitute would position her on the margins of a film in which she provides the narrative centre, a film in which she is the

heroine and the star. To return to my original question - why cast Goldberg in an action film - perhaps it is precisely in the action cinema that the anxieties attendant on the spectacular sexuality attributed to the black woman can be displaced onto the spectacle of the action which drives the narrative.

Conclusion

Clear antecedents for the 'new' action heroine of the late 1980s and early 1990s can be found in the American cinema. The action cinema can draw on a range of stereotypes for representing the active heroine. These images however tend to be limited by the seeming need to provide narrative explanation for the heroine's activities and by the always-already sexualised representation of the female body. For black women in the genre the anxieties attendant on the figure of the active heroine are further amplified.

CHAPTER TWO: RACIAL DISCOURSE IN THE ACTION CINEMA: BLACK BUDDIES AND WHITE HEROES

Introduction

This chapter explores discourses of race in the American action cinema. The analysis of a symbolic equation between drugs and blackness, raised in chapter one, is developed. It is argued that though black characters are often marginal in terms of the narrative, blackness is symbolically central to the action cinema. The interplay of discourses of race and gender is discussed, together with an analysis of the articulation of racial difference through the buddy format. The chapter ends with a detailed analysis of Predator 2 and its representation of a black action hero.

The Symbolic Place of Blackness in the Action Cinema

Action heroes and heroines are cinematically constructed almost exclusively through their physicality, with the display of the body forming a key part of the visual excess that is offered. Such an emphasis on physicality has, as already indicated, opened up a space in the action cinema for black performers who have been repeatedly excluded from or marginalised within other Hollywood genres.

Stereotypically defined through the body and through a variety of kinds of performance, blackness is already coded in terms of spectacle. As Kobena Mercer notes in his discussion of Robert Mapplethorpe's Black Book though, the

display of the black male body has not generally been staged within the high cultural context of the nude in which Mapplethorpe locates it. The black body has more often been figured within popular culture, achieving a visibility primarily through the forums of sports and entertainment. (1) It is not surprising then that the black body is a more visible figure in the popular action cinema than in other, perhaps more prestigious forms of Hollywood production. However, as demonstrated in relation to Whoopi Goldberg's role in Fatal Beauty, the inclusion of black performers at the centre of the action picture poses a range of iconographic problems which are often worked out and 'resolved' in terms of sexuality.

The arguments presented in this chapter are based on two propositions. Firstly, and at its simplest, that the Hollywood cinema has operated within and has rarely challenged racist discourse. Secondly that formulations of 'race', constructions of blackness in particular, are central to the American action cinema. (2) Black actors, performers and stars have regularly appeared as both secondary characters and as vital members of the combative groups or gangs found in the genre. Only rarely though have they been given the chance to take centre stage. Danny Glover's performance as Lieutenant Mike Harrigan in Predator 2 provides one such instance. The film exemplifies something of the complexity that has been

brought to the action cinema by the use of well-established character actors as it has moved into big-budget status, as well ^{as} opening up some questions around the negotiations currently in operation around Hollywood's construction of blackness. (3)

An association between blackness and criminality within Hollywood's symbolic system has already been noted. Black characters regularly appear in American action films as criminal elements, populating the prisons of films like Lock Up, Tango and Cash and Death Warrant. In a more central role Wesley Snipes plays the ultimate psychopath to Stallone's ultimate police officer in Demolition Man (Marco Brambilla, 1993). Black characters are also crucial in such narratives as sources of information to white detective heroes. A typical example of this role is that played by Antonio Fargas as Huggy Bear in the popular 1970s television crime series Starsky and Hutch. The series was primarily concerned to offer up Starsky and Hutch as desirable pin-up heroes who occupy themselves primarily with intense male bonding. Huggy Bear would provide the information needed in order to get the work of detection done. (4) Blackness functions explicitly here as a bridge into the mysterious knowledges of 'the street' and implicitly, into the corrupt world of crime.

The intermediary figure, the snitch or go-between, provides a way for the white heroes of crime narratives to tap into the secret world of black criminality. The relationship between the figure of the hero and the black go-between varies across a range of registers, from friendly banter to seething intolerance, though the pair are rarely seen coming to blows. This narrative device performs a series of functions. Firstly, it enables the business of detection to take place off-screen. Black informants provide white heroes with the information they need, leaving the heroes free to be constructed in terms of a sexualised display. The processes through which evidence and information is acquired are simply effaced. Such tendencies became even more pronounced in Miami Vice, the successful television series of the 1980s, which devoted much of its screen time to the construction of star Don Johnson as sexual spectacle.(5) The show also commodified the body of co-star Philip Michael Thomas, a move which to an extent redefined the role of the black buddy.

Secondly, the relationship between hero and informant further elaborates a representational relation of power and subservience. While the relationship between the white hero and his black helper may be initially tense, the black character, already marginal, invariably ends up willingly sacrificing himself. In Death Warrant Priest, a powerful black figure within the film's prison setting, sacrifices

himself for white hero Jean-Claude Van Damme, a sacrifice which negates his earlier hostility and for which the film offers no explanation. The incoherence of this particular film's articulation of racial difference is complexly bound into anxieties about homoeroticism and gay male desire. That is, there are relations of power and desire in operation which the film cannot bring itself to state explicitly, or perhaps cannot find the words/images to state. The film makers are able, nonetheless, to fall back on an unproblematic assumption, indeed a cinematic convention, that a black hero/character is willing to sacrifice himself for a white hero/character.

A film that refuses this convention to an extent is 48 Hours, which pairs Eddie Murphy and Nick Nolte as convict and cop. Though this pairing articulates a clear relationship of power, Nolte also functions as the straight man for Murphy's comic performance. As with Goldberg's performance in Fatal Beauty, Murphy's action roles make use of his stand-up comic persona. The verbal dexterity of the comic feeds into the 'wise-guy' persona (discussed further in chapter four) which functions to articulate a masculine identity that is distinct from a physical (muscular) embodiment of the heroic figure.

The inter-racial buddy relationship also has a third significant implication for the operation of narrative.

Whilst Hollywood may construct blackness as marginal, it also has a symbolic centrality. This is particularly pronounced in variants of the action cinema, a form that is played out over the terrain of criminality, and one that is often directly concerned with the policing of deviance. Thus, as in the case of Fatal Beauty, black characters do not sit easily at the centre of the fiction. The opening sequences of Fatal Beauty feature not only Rizzoli, who is introduced to us in prostitute's guise, but a range of grotesque stereotypical figures against which she can then be defined - an overweight white drug dealer coded as gay, a naked and insanelly giggling Asian worker in a drugs factory, along with a whole array of vicious white punks. It is partly through such references that the film attempts to construct a new margin against which the centre, Goldberg in the role of a black female officer, can be defined. The positioning of black performers at the centre of the action narrative usually involves a renegotiation, and reaffirmation of the existence of the margins.

The Black Action Hero in the 1970s

Before considering more recent black action films, it is necessary to refer to the so-called blaxspoitation films of the 1970s, which provide a significant point of origin for many contemporary images and narratives. Through a series of commercially successful films produced in the early 1970s, the figure of the black action hero gained a new

visibility in American cinema. Richard Roundtree in Shaft (Gordon Parks, 1971), Melvin Van Peebles in Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (Melvin Van Peebles, 1971) and Ron O'Neal in Superfly (Gordon Parks Jr, 1972) offered an aggressive articulation of black masculinity, forming a part of Hollywood's limited response to an increasingly significant black audience. (6) Both Bogle (1991) and Reid (1993) discuss the uncomfortable aspects of these films which were popular with black American audiences, and greeted with both pleasure and uncertainty by black American critics. Reid, amongst others, notes the challenge posed by the celebratory articulation of heroic black Americans. Uncertainty stems from the extent to which such moves were compromised by the need to cater to studios to gain distribution, and by the stereotypical imagery involved in the action genre.

I have noted the extent to which action films of the 1980s work with exaggerated images, derived in part from cartoons and comic-strips, of white male identity, images which provoke a certain anxiety at the level of representation. The characterisation of the black hero in 1970s film also exploited the exaggeration of existing stereotypes, constructing the black hero as a powerful figure, but also as hyper-(hetero)sexual and as very much part of an urban culture. The parodic exaggeration of stereotypes proved problematic in this case, due partly to the complex

evolution of the very images which these films drew on. These images came from a long visual history through which white western culture has sought to project its fears and desires onto the black body. Complexly inscribed in colonial discourse and written in terms of power as it is, the reclamation and production of images of the black body for a black audience involves a difficult set of negotiations. For critical commentators at the time of the release of these successful black action pictures, the images provoked an uneasy response, set against an understanding of the politics of representation. Donald Bogle cites a contemporary feature from the magazine Ebony which mourned the irony of a situation in which

the black marches and demonstrations of the 1960s reached artistic fulfilment in the 1970s with Flip Wilson's Geraldine and Melvin Van Peeble's Sweetback, two provocative and ultimately insidious reincarnations of all the Sapphires and Studs of yesteryear (in Bogle 1991: 236).

But as Bogle points out it was in an attempt to avoid reproducing one stereotype, that of the black man as a passive, asexual figure, that such films effectively fell into one more stereotypical articulation of black masculinity, the stud.

The heroes are clearly located within an urban culture or community, providing a sharp contrast to the often dislocated black heroes and heroines who have featured in the inter-racial buddy format popular in the 1980s. (7)

Shaft seeks to appropriate the marginal position of the 'private eye' associated with Bogart, for example. Yet the street is also constructed as very much the hero's domain. In films such as The Big Sleep (Howard Hawks, 1946) the street is a potentially threatening space that the hero must inhabit, involving a culture from which he is excluded. If threat does not lurk behind every corner in the world of Shaft, the film picks up details such as the hero's difficulty in getting a cab. In the use of location shooting, the attention to detail in mise-en-scene, the fast-paced editing and camera work, Shaft constructs a naturalistic look. As Raymond Williams (1977) points out, realism has tended to involve a more complex representation of previously underrepresented groups. In its use of the action genre the 'blaxspoitation' film combined realist and fantastic traditions. It is precisely the isolation from other black Americans and from any sense of community that has been found so problematic in many recent films. Thus Ed Guerrero speaks of the buddy format as a form of 'protective custody' for the black image in 1980s American cinema (in Diawara ed. 1993).

Shaft's narrative is framed by the hero's relationship of friendly hostility with a white detective, Androzzi. The latter's scruffy appearance contrasts with Shaft's impeccable dress. In the opening sequences Shaft buys information from a shoeshine man. This exchange is

followed by Androzzi's attempt to get information from him, which is also an attempt to position the hero in the familiar role of go-between. Verbal exchanges are as much battles for dominance as physical fights. Aware of such conventions the film positions Shaft in the uncooperative, but basically law-abiding, role of the private eye. This role has been established through fictional characters like Chandler's Philip Marlowe, who were repeatedly arrested but knew and were articulate in voicing their rights. But if Marlowe's name was designed to invoke a chivalric literary heritage, the name Shaft carries aggressively sexual connotations. (8) Indeed the action is framed by images of the sexualised black body as spectacle. John Shaft is a fictional character who is inevitably constructed by and through a history of stereotypes which originate in desiring and fearful white fantasies. As with the production of the action heroine as phallic woman, the construction of the black action hero as a stud both acknowledges, makes visible, and also retains elements of that history of representation. Thus Shaft's intellect (his book lined apartment) is contrasted to Androzzi whose Italian ethnicity marks him as proletarian. (9)

Reviewing the films of the 1970s, Gladstone L. Yearwood calls for a demystification of the black hero. He suggests that whilst Shaft and Superfly 'attempt to subvert, or at least question, the dominant tradition' they are

'effectively harnessed by it in their usage of the Hollywood model as the basis for the development of black heroes' (Yearwood 1982: 48). Yearwood recognises that the kind of cinema he is searching for cannot be found in Hollywood traditions, in which the over-determined figure of the hero stands in for a generalised struggle against the powerlessness of his position. His call for a demystification of the black hero echoes the feminist unease which has centred on the figure of the gun-toting action heroine in the recent Hollywood cinema, but fundamentally goes against the archetypes with which the popular cinema works. The action cinema seeks to mythicise not the specificity but the generalised fact of struggle for a popular audience. The black action films may well prove to be so unsettling precisely because they seem to be so acutely aware of the issues of representation that are at stake in their construction of the black hero. That history is a constant presence, informing both the styling of the heroic images and the construction of the narrative.

Gender and Sexuality: Black and White Bodies in the Action Cinema

The construction of the body through racial discourses cuts across and informs the articulation of gender and sexuality in the action cinema. The display of the black body carries radically different meanings to the display of the white body, which audiences are so frequently offered in

big-budget action films. The action films of the 1970s reached for the stereotype of the confident, hyper-sexualised black man. By contrast, the exaggerated physical characteristics of the white hero tend to lead him into narrative situations in which he is subjected to torture and suffering. The boundaries of his body are repeatedly violated, penetrated in a variety of ways, from the scene in which Rocky's eye is cut open in the first film of the series to that in which Rambo sews himself up in First Blood (Ted Kotcheff, 1982) or cauterises his wounds in widescreen close-up in Rambo III (Peter MacDonald, 1988). Such imagery derives in part from a Christian tradition within which martyrdom and sacrifice are central. In part these exercises in suffering serve to indicate the self-sufficiency of the hero, the fact that he can survive with little or no help. (10)

However, a Christian imagery of sacrifice and suffering has rather different meanings in relation to the black hero.

(11) The narrative relationship between the white hero and his black informant allows for both the display of the hero's body, largely dispensing with the work of investigation, and the enactment of relations of racially defined dominance and subservience. Indeed the two are intimately bound together, so that the suggestion and demonstration, through the performance of the narrative, of the superiority of the white hero over his black informant

functions to allay an anxiety attendant on the sexualised display of the white male body. Hence the significance of one of the recurrent character types in the recent American action cinema, that of the damaged black man. This figure represents a way of making safe the black man's fantasised hyper-sexuality. It is in relation to these fantasies of phallic sexuality that the frequent appearance of physically damaged black men, cast as key characters in action narratives, can be understood as providing a form of reassurance. (12)

In Death Warrant Jean-Claude Van Damme's black buddy Hawkins has a dead eye, whilst in A.W.O.L. (Sheldon Lettich, 1990) Joshua has a badly damaged leg and a pronounced limp. (13) Alongside Hollywood's construction of black men as sexual threat, exists another established tradition in which representations of black men are suffused with a passive Christian imagery. Yearwood points to the coexistence of 'stoic Christian types' with the 'low-comic buffoon', judging it irrelevant whether Hollywood chooses to emphasise 'one castrated image above the other' (Yearwood 1982: 46-7). Here sadism and humour are seen to perform similar functions. In action films comedy is sometimes used to undermine notions of masculine power, a function which relates to Yearwood's designation of the comic image as 'castrated'. (14) Within the logic of this psychoanalytic framework, we can understand, in a

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different perspective, the casting of black and Asian women as sidekick to white heroes, women such as Julia Nickson in Kambo or Rae Dawn Chong in Commando. The woman in this instance is already 'castrated'. Unthreatening to the white hero, she confirms both his difference and his strength.

Death Warrant also invokes the stereotypical damaged black man, further figuring blackness as a pathologised space of deviant desire. Old-timer Hawkins is represented as damaged through his 'dead' eye, a flaw which perhaps makes him unthreatening enough to be able to live to the end of the film. The second key black figure in the film, Priest, is, by way of contrast, figured in terms of an ambiguous sexuality. Priest inhabits the lower floors of the prison, a space that is restricted. The hero, Burke (Van Damme), is told that the guards will not visit this part of the prison and his cellmate's warning that he should 'cover his ass...literally', is a moment that more explicitly voices the fact that the threat faced by Burke in this film is rape, gay desire re-presented as violence to the body. Priest offers Burke one of his 'ladies', sexually ambiguous men/women, more as a challenge than a sign of friendship. (15) If Hawkins survives, Priest, who has decided inexplicably to help Burke and thus sacrifice himself, is violently killed.

Within a representational system that constructs black men as either hyper-sexualised or as stoically passive, the representation of the black action hero is consequently fraught. A totally passive hero is a contradiction in terms, whilst an aggressively active black hero seems to provoke altogether too much anxiety for conservative Hollywood conventions. (16) The centrality of black buddies to the symbolic schema of Death Warrant's prison drama stems partly from the need to inscribe difference within an all-male setting. The familiar inter-racial buddy format represents an extension of this logic.

'Race', Difference and the Buddy Movie

In contrast to the construction of the hero as a lone figure, many recent action films use the format and conventions of the buddy movie. The male pairing allows for comedy to develop through verbal repartee. This kind of interplay is central to films like Tango and Cash in which Sylvester Stallone and Kurt Russell move from hostility to friendship. Thelma and Louise develops this tradition for women, with, again, a series of one-liners and visual gags. Through the 1980s the male buddy pairing has frequently involved a white hero and his black partner, with the black figure occupying either a secondary or largely supportive role. This pairing has clear antecedents in the American cinema. Whilst it is not a buddy movie, such images of bonding form an important part

of the relationship between training Sergeant Highway/Clint Eastwood and Stitch Jones/Mario Van Peebles in Heartbreak Ridge (Clint Eastwood, 1986). The two meet early on in the film, though they are unaware of each other's identity (neither is in uniform). Their initially antagonistic relationship ultimately becomes one of respect as they fight together in Grenada. This film reverses the relationship between Lou Gossett, Jr and Richard Gere in An Officer and a Gentleman (Taylor Hackford, 1981), a film similarly concerned with military rites of passage. Beyond the male camaraderie of the military, Mel Gibson and Danny Glover were successfully paired in the Lethal Weapon films. Don Johnson and Philip Michael Thomas fought crime together in the hit 1980s television series Miami Vice. In the Rocky films Stallone and Carl Weathers as Apollo Creed move from enmity in the first and second film to buddies in the third and fourth. In Rocky IV Apollo dies in the ring and Rocky takes it on himself to avenge his friend's death.

What is the role of the black partner in the buddy action film? On one level he is there to marvel at the hero's achievements and to support him through difficult situations. He operates as a supportive, sometimes almost fatherly, figure. Donald Bogle suggests that a kind of servicing role is being performed by these black buddies, so that in scenarios of 'interracial male bonding, black men are a cross between toms and mummies: all-giving, all-

knowing, all-sacrificing nurturers' (Bogle 1991: 276). For Guerrero, as mentioned above, the buddy movie locates black stars within a reassuring framework. Hollywood cinema has, he argues:

put what is left of the Black presence on the screen in the protective custody, so to speak, of a White lead or co-star, and therefore in conformity with dominant, White sensibilities and expectations of what Blacks should be like (Diawara ed, 1993: 239).

Guerrero accurately characterises the buddy formula as a format which allows the continuation of conservative traditions of representation, offers some fantastic resolution of the tensions around racial difference in America, at the same time as it is designed to appeal to a wide range of audiences. (17)

For Bogle the relationship between Al Powell/Reginald Veljohnson and John McClane/Bruce Willis in Die Hard represents an extreme enactment of the scenario of sacrifice. The relationship between the two, which is central to the film, develops through an articulation of gendered identity which draws on the stereotypical history to which Bogle refers. Powell is the personification of the good-natured, chubby police officer. Plump and friendly, he senses that McClane is also a good cop and defends him against his idiotic and ineffectual boss. Powell establishes radio contact with McClane early on and, though they do not meet until the final scene, they speak to each other throughout, becoming closer as they swap

family and police stories. During their conversations Powell reveals that he is a 'desk-jockey', a policeman who only does paperwork, explaining that since he accidentally shot a child he has been unable to fire a gun.

In terms both of established traditions of representation of black masculinity, and the iconography of the action cinema, Powell's refusal to fire a gun signals his emasculated status. The refusal to carry a gun is also a refusal of the policeman's role on the streets - Powell has become a figure in an office rather than a figure in a landscape. He is thus also rendered the object of humour. Powell is established as a friendly, reliable but essentially unthreatening figure. Yet he is the only one outside the besieged building to appreciate the threat posed by the 'terrorists' within, with the police and the FBI acting in an arrogant, bureaucratic manner. Powell keeps up an ironic commentary on their actions, complementing McClane's wisecracking. When McClane has rescued his wife and battled his way out of the building, he and Powell finally meet. Their eyes meet in the crowd and they embrace in what is an emotional moment, with soft music on the soundtrack. After the introductions one of the villains, Karl, emerges from the building, brandishing a rifle. Karl is shot repeatedly and the camera pulls back from a close-up of the barrel of a gun to reveal that it is Powell who has fired the fatal shots. Operating as part of

the film's restoration of narrative order, Powell is re-masculinised in this moment, made iconographically a cop, and a man, once more.

A gendered dynamic operates in Die Hard's buddy relationship, a dynamic through which Powell is constructed as an initially passive figure who is, through his relationship with McClane, masculinised. This echoes Bogle's characterisation of the relationship between the two figures in terms of active and passive gender stereotypes. But the relationship is also indicative of the ways in which concerns of sexuality are mapped through Hollywood's buddy friendships. The buddy movie, particularly as it developed in the 1970s, after films such as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (George Roy Hill, 1969) offered, amongst other things, a space for the covert exploration of the homoerotic possibilities of male bonding. The use of female sidekicks like Sydney in Action Jackson (Craig R Baxley, 1988), allows for a more explicit play of (hetero)sexuality.

In the Lethal Weapon films the inter-racial pairing of Mel Gibson as Martin Riggs and Danny Glover as Roger Murtaugh operates without any explicit reference to racial difference in the script. Bogle suggests that Murtaugh functions in the film as 'the good black man' who 'brings to his white loner friend an element of calm control and a

budding maturity' (Bogle 1991: 276). Yet, as Guerrero notes, it is also the case that Lethal Weapon 'in exception to buddy thematics' positions Glover's character within the context of home and family so that 'his character is broadened and humanized beyond Hollywood convention' (Diwara ed, 1993: 244). The film operates to both negate and assert difference between the buddies. In Lethal Weapon 2 issues of racism and racial difference are raised in a displaced form, through the figure of unqualified evil that is represented by the film's South African villains. The repeated reference to apartheid, situated in another place, helps to ease over some of the difficulties of the inter-racial pairing. It is a liberal America, contrasted throughout to South Africa, that is the stage for the buddies' drama.

The Lethal Weapon films manage the homoerotic inflections of the buddy pairing, partly by reinscribing difference within the terms of 'race'. In fact, a range of differences are established between the two - the attraction of opposites is a convention of both the buddy movie and the romance. Riggs and Murtaugh are paired in the first film very much against Murtaugh's wishes. He is older than Riggs (Glover is given graying hair for the part). Riggs has a bad reputation, as a cop who either has a death wish or is faking insanity in order to claim a pension. Either way Murtaugh is not happy with his new

partner, but as the film progresses the two become friends. All three films work through a series of verbal reassurances that the relationship is definitely not based on any sexual desire. When a nearby building explodes, Murtaugh jumps on Riggs in order to extinguish the flames on his jacket. Even such an 'explicable' moment of physical contact is framed by Riggs' protests about 'fags'. The declarations of love found in Lethal Weapon 2 and Lethal Weapon 3 are repeatedly undercut by comedy or by violence.

As the first film progresses, Murtaugh's family comes under threat and he and Riggs join together to defeat the villains. The end of the film is an action showpiece. The participants are soaking wet - a device which either reveals half-naked bodies or allows for clinging costumes. Here Riggs takes on the villainous Mr Joshua, fighting him half-naked on Murtaugh's front lawn. The scene offers an image of the sexual-power relations of the inter-racial buddy pairing in microcosm. Whilst the white hero shows off his body, his black buddie stands back, a protective figure who watches from the sidelines preventing any unwanted intervention. The fight, of course, also functions as a key moment of spectacle, emphasising the hero's strength. The setpiece fight channels the concerns of the narrative into a physical conflict. The epilogue features Riggs' inclusion within the Murtaugh family, as he

is invited in for a Christmas meal, so that by the second film he is clearly one of the family.

The opening sequence of Lethal Weapon 2 picks up where the first film left off, emphasising the centrality of the buddy relationship between Riggs and Murtaugh. The film opens on a car chase with a close-up of a gleeful Riggs. Riggs' enthusiasm is juxtaposed with Murtaugh's long-suffering look of disbelief and his refusal to drive any faster. Back in the police station, their colleagues are taking bets on who will apprehend their quarry first - all the odds laid on Riggs are reversed when they find out that Murtaugh is driving his wife's station wagon. The jokey contrast between Murtaugh as a cautious family man, worried about home and car, and Riggs as a reckless, rootless figure, is pursued at some length through the film. The station wagon is gradually demolished as the film unfolds. Reprimanding the team at the station house, Murtaugh plays the grown-up to Riggs' adolescent stunts. Affectionately harassed at home, Murtaugh is thinking about easing himself into retirement. He is old-fashioned, embarrassed at his daughter's debut appearance in a television commercial for condoms. Attempting to assert himself he orders her boyfriend, George, out of the house, telling him that he has a gun. In turn Riggs reassures George, telling him that 'it's an old gun and he's not a very good shot'. This sequence comically reprises a set of associations, between

potency, masculinity and weaponry, which are common in both the action picture specifically, and American cinema culture more generally. The film's audience will probably be aware from a viewing of the first film that Murtaugh is, in fact, an excellent shot.

Both men are further defined in the film against Leo Geetz (Joe Pesci), a witness they are assigned to protect. Leo's comic role functions to produce a figure who is both feminised and trivialised by his hysterical speech. Anxieties about masculinity, sexuality and the buddy movie are played out in the final scene of Lethal Weapon 2, in which Riggs pretends to be dying in Murtaugh's arms. The parodic enactment of a war movie death scene makes the conventions of that genre comically explicit. Picking up on the cinematic convention which only allows men to embrace if one of them is dying, the film both plays with and averts the possibility of desire between the two men. Playing to and subverting an audience's generic expectations has often provided a source of comedy in Hollywood films. If anything, this strategy has become more exaggerated in recent films, a tendency that is taken up in more detail in the next chapter. It is not despite, but through comic moments that the device of inter-racial male bonding functions in the Lethal Weapon series, comedy which plays off generic expectations as well as a range of stereotypes. Yet if these devices reinscribe the

difference between men, at the same time a political history of racial difference within America is negated. The discussion below of Danny Glover's role in Predator 2, takes up questions surrounding the inscription of 'race' within the American action cinema.

Danny Glover as Action Hero: 'Predator 2'

Predator 2, the sequel to John McTiernan's 1987 science-fiction/jungle patrol film starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, is one of a very few big-budget action pictures to centre on a black hero. (18) Danny Glover as Lieutenant Mike Harrigan, heads up the policeteam: Danny/Ruben Blades, Leona/Maria Conchita Alonso and Jerry/Bill Paxton. The emphasis on teamwork in Harrigan's policing philosophy stems from the warzone conditions in which law enforcement is conducted in the film's world, that of Los Angeles in 1997. Harrigan's team are picked off one by one - though Leona is not killed - with the hero left to battle the Predator alone in the final part of the film. There are two striking features to the film's articulation of racial discourses. Firstly, the jungle metaphor, which operates through the film's construction of Los Angeles, but which also relates to a construction of blackness through stereotypical images of the primitive. Secondly, the ideological figure of drugs, which, as I have argued, forms an important feature of many contemporary action and crime narratives. In Predator 2 drugs are part of the scenery,

not used as part of some personalised moral crusade as they are in Fatal Beauty. Nonetheless they are significant within the film's articulation of blackness and criminality. The choice of Los Angeles as the location also has a significance, allowing the film to draw on images of the city as a site of conflicting racial and religious groupings.

The opening sequence of Predator 2 sets up the Los Angeles-as-jungle image that is pursued throughout the film. Over a black screen we hear a variety of bird and animal noises as percussion-based music gradually fades up. This is archetypal Hollywood 'jungle music' and since the original Predator was set in the jungles of Central America this comes as no surprise. We cut into green images - the camera rapidly moving in an aerial shot looking down on the tree tops. Suddenly the city skyline is revealed behind the trees with the locating text, 'Los Angeles, 1997'. The image cuts abruptly into the Predator's point of view. The creature detects movement by heat, represented on screen by shifting patches of red and yellow on a blue background. The Predator seems to be tracking the city streets with speed - the animal noises with which the soundtrack begins merging into the noises of the city: cars, screams, voices, music, radio and television. Finally we pick out the sound and heat images of gunfire and cut into 'real' (film) images on an explosion, finding ourselves in the middle of

a chaotic street battle between the police and the city's drug gangs.

These opening sequences set the tone for the hectic pace at which the film moves. Multiple textures of sound and image are juxtaposed. In this first gun battle, 'real' film images are intercut with the Predator's point of view and with television coverage. We repeatedly shift from seeing flickering video images of news reports to their 'originals' on which the rest of the action intrudes. Elsewhere in the film we see and hear computer screens and computer-generated voices. More insistently, conventional two-shots of conversation between Harrigan and his team, and between gang members, are disrupted by the intercutting of the predator's point of view. We still hear the characters voices over these computer-generated screen images, but they are distorted, rendered sinister. It is with a variety of fast-paced techniques, such as rapid camera movements, quickfire editing and jump cuts that we are steered through an 'alien' and dangerous future landscape. The city is both recognisable and at the same time rendered strange as it is seen from a variety of perspectives.

The plot of Predator 2 incorporates many of the ideological figures that have emerged already as standard elements of the action film. Harrigan is a tough cop but also a team

man. His team are loyal only to him: they are united in opposition to the constricting hierarchy of the police department. Harrigan ends his initial pep talk to Jerry with an ironic congratulation, saying 'Welcome to the War'. As in RoboCop, where Murphy is deliberately assigned to a deadly part of Detroit so that he will be killed for recycling as cyborg material, the precinct that Harrigan polices represents the warzone of Los Angeles. It is clear from the opening sequences, that Harrigan's characterisation of the streets as a warzone is accurate. Our knowledge thus positions us with the police team, against the authorities. The police department bureaucrats of Predator 2 are, predictably, defined by their inability to see that they are involved in a war, and a consequent reluctance to give their officers the support that they need. The theme of institutional blindness is doubled within the narrative of Predator 2. Not only do Harrigan and his team have to deal with the Predator and the police department, but they are also caught up with a federal team headed up by Peter Keyes/Gary Busey who want to capture the creature alive.

It is no surprise that, amidst all these confusing elements the characters, if not the audience, are unsure as to what it is that they are fighting. As a sequel the film must deal, as Aliens had to, with the fact that an audience probably knows already what the narrative's monstrous

element is. The problem is one of sustaining tension until the characters find out what the audience already knows. The original Predator utilised a tense narrative involving knowledge and appearances. Schwarzenegger's unit think they are confronting a human enemy. Their mistakes stem from this initial misrecognition. Again reminiscent of Aliens, much of the original film is coded through the conventions of the American Vietnam film. The barbarous way in which the members of the patrol are picked off and murdered - the Predator skins its victims and leaves them hanging upside down - is attributed to the viciousness of the 'alien' enemy. Accusations of brutality form a central part of wartime propaganda, drawing like the horror film on the figure of a monstrous other. Predator conflates these two discourses whilst at the same time demonstrating the danger of being taken in by them. The explanation of the killings in Predator as a result of enemy action cannot be sustained. One member of the patrol turns to a spiritual explanation in an unsuccessful attempt to ward off the alien - a strategy that we see repeated in the second film - whilst others panic and run to their deaths. Before 'he' is revealed to be an alien - an 'Other World Life Form' - the narrative threat in this film is constructed, through the codes and conventions of the Vietnam/jungle/patrol movie, in terms of a specifically racial otherness. Themes like the invisibility of a barbarous enemy, the uselessness of high-tech equipment within a guerilla war, as well as

the treachery of the military leaders who have set up the mission, are all found in Predator. These Orientalist fictions, through which the narrative of America in Vietnam has been repeatedly rendered in the cinema, become intimately associated with the mysterious and monstrous figure of the Predator.

In Predator 2 this construction of the alien is mobilised once again through the use of a sustained jungle metaphor, but also through cinematic codes associated with blackness, rather than the imagined East invoked in the first film. A set of associations already exists within Hollywood representations between blackness, Africa and images of the jungle, with Tarzan films a key point of mediation in cinematic terms. (19) The Los Angeles of Predator 2 is represented as an urban jungle. It is also made explicit that the Predator is 'on safari'. He is hunting for trophies which we ultimately see assembled in a trophy room on board the alien ship. An indicative image frames Harrigan, after making a phone call (from a call box, rather than his office, visually positioning him outside the institution) stands outside the window of a taxidermist's shop. His head is framed as a reflection in amongst the stuffed animals that we see there. The image is held (a rare moment of stillness in this hectic film) before Harrigan looks uncomfortable at the thought and moves away. This narrative device reprises a common

science-fiction theme in which the most sophisticated sites of human culture - science, weaponry, the city - function as little more than a primitive hunting ground for a superior culture.

Initially the Predator's killings are mistaken for the activities of a human agency, as in the first film. The film's action, sited in the midst of urban warfare, opposes two drug gangs: the Columbians and, the force on the ascendant, the Jamaican voodoo Posse. The Jamaicans, led by King Willie/Calvin Lockhart, are represented in terms of a specific black cultural identity. It is made explicit - Leona explains this to Jerry - that the gang use voodoo partly to scare the opposition, appropriating a history of fearful stereotyping as a weapon. In a gruesome scene the Jamaicans stage an attack on a Colombian gang leader's penthouse apartment. The Colombian is strung up from the ceiling, just as the Predator's victims are, as the Jamaican gang members proceed to act out a ritual which involves daubing him with blood and cutting his heart out. The savagery is intended to frighten. When the Colombian offers two million dollars for his life, the Jamaican points out that the killing is not 'about money - it's about power'. Immediately after this 'ritual' slaying, the Predator attacks. When Harrigan's team arrive on the scene, all are strung up from the ceiling, though only the Jamaicans have been skinned. The film then draws on images

of a fantasised black barbarity, whilst at the same time acknowledging that these images function as myth. Though the references to voodoo rituals are clearly marked as masquerade, they also form part of a rhetoric of 'race' in which Harrigan's heroic blackness is played off against images of a quite different, 'primitive', black culture.

One of the Predator's most recognisable physical features is its 'hair'. It is unsurprising, given the repeated links established between the monstrous and blackness within Hollywood's symbolic, that the Predator is given dreadlocks. This is but one of a series of associative links drawn between the Predator and the Jamaican gang, links that are established through appearance, actions and editing. Further, whilst the Predator is clearly a creature from a high-tech culture his weapons, like Rambo's nuclear bow and arrow, are iconographically primitive. Though he has a nuclear auto-destruct capacity, the Predator wields knives and spears, weapons which recall an imagery of the primitive, particularly when articulated through the film's jungle/safari metaphor.

The Predator then, is partly constructed as threatening through codes of blackness-as-primitive-as-other. A crucial set of sequences in this respect is the meeting between Harrigan and King Willie, a scene that is immediately followed by the appearance of the Predator, who

takes King Willie's head as a trophy. Harrigan is leaving the police station with Jerry when a car, its top designed in a zebra pattern, pulls up in front of them to take Harrigan to King Willie. A joke is made out of the different images of blackness played out through the figures of policeman Harrigan and the Jamaican drug gang - figures already opposed as representatives of the law and of criminality. The car that transports Harrigan to his meeting is literally oozing marijuana smoke. When Harrigan gets out of the car in a dark alley he coughs, spluttering 'you guys really ought to cut down'.

In the meeting between Harrigan and King Willie that follows, the gang leader is closely identified with voodoo, through his costume and his talk of spirits. He tells Harrigan that the thing doing the killing is 'from the other side'. In this, Willie comes closer to understanding the plot than Harrigan has at that point - acknowledging the other world qualities of the Predator - though this does not help him. The meeting between the two men, followed by the Predator's attack, brings together the film's radically opposed constructions of blackness. King Willie addresses Harrigan as 'Babylon, Mr Policeman', whilst Harrigan says of the predator 'He killed your people, now mine'. In appealing to a conventional crime or mob movie distinction, that between cops and robber, Harrigan also invokes here the cultural gulf separating the

two. Whilst the voodoo posse is constructed within the film as overwhelmingly deviant, it is characterised by a kind of cultural rootedness, an identity, however perverse. By contrast, Harrigan is not located within any community in particular, even that of the police, and he is certainly not seen at home or with friends.

King Willie's death screams bleed over on the soundtrack into a close-up of his severed head, mouth and eyes wide open, swinging by his dreadlocks at the Predator's side. The skull is cleaned and placed in the Predator's gruesome trophy room. These scenes, with the primitive look of the space ship and the collection of skulls, reinforce the iconographic links between the Predator and the Jamaicans. It is the projection of the monstrous onto the savage figure of the Predator and the Jamaican drug gang, which allows Harrigan to enact an heroic blackness. The creature is a monstrous double, able to mimic even colloquial human speech. Perhaps because it remains recognisable, the distortion of the Predator's speech, vision and appearance, works to produce it as radically other. In addition to the work of these discourses however, the film is also structured through Harrigan's opposition to an FBI which is characterised as all white. The identity of both the Predator and Peter Keyes present themselves as problems for Harrigan.

While King Willie offers the spirit world as an explanation for the Predator, Keyes's federal team offer a fetishised commitment to science and technology, inviting Harrigan to simply sit back and 'enjoy the show'. They have set up an elaborate, and completely ineffectual, trap for the Predator. If blackness signifies, and is signified through, marginality and deviance in Predator 2, then whiteness signifies, and is signified through, an authority that is not to be trusted. The federal team are positioned firmly within government bureaucracy. Early in the film we see the team arrive at the scene of the Predator's crime, excluding Harrigan and his men. Stereotypical FBI men, they represent a faceless authority. Keyes seems to enjoy sneering at Harrigan. He also has the power to erase his existence - Harrigan is warned that he could 'turn up missing'.

Harrigan and Keyes repeatedly come into conflict, battling, in a conventional way, over 'territory' and 'jurisdiction'. One of the ways in which the action hero is defined as heroic is precisely through his refusal to accept official boundaries, ignoring the 'Keep Out' signs posted by those in power. The contest between Harrigan and Keyes is filtered in Predator 2 through codes of both gender and race. That the action film's familiar contest over territory is concerned with masculine identity, is summed up rather succinctly by Harrigan, who tells his captain

that his insistence on federal control of the case 'means you're cutting off my dick and sticking it up my ass'. Though a team man, Harrigan is ironically reprimanded by his superiors for his 'John Wayne attitude'. The designation is fitting in terms of the strength of Harrigan's character. The Predator selects only well-armed opponents, relishing the challenge in the hunt for trophies. That it is Harrigan who is singled out marks him as a correspondingly powerful figure. Leona, the female member of Harrigan's team, is spared when the Predator's scan of her body reveals her to be pregnant. The only survivor of the massacre in the Columbian drug leader's apartment is a woman - presumably too weak to be of interest.

When Harrigan has killed the Predator, he finds himself surrounded by aliens who do not attack him but simply carry off the body of their comrade. One of their number remains behind and gives Harrigan a gift - an antique gun inscribed with the date 1715. Whilst this allows for the film's punchline - an 'I'll be back' motif - it is also, within the system of associations between guns and masculine power, a moment of recognition for Harrigan's heroics. This recognition is followed, after a huge explosion, by one more brief confrontation with the surviving leader of the disgruntled FBI team who have been denied their prize. In the complex permutations of hunter and hunted offered in

this film, Harrigan and the Predator are allowed a brief point of contact, whilst the film's representatives of authority vacate the scene in their helicopter.

Predator 2 produces in Harrigan a masculinised black hero who refuses the stereotypes of hyper-(hetero)sexuality. At the same time however, blackness is repositioned in terms of the monstrous within the film's symbolic hierarchy. These two elements actually work together, with the latter in some senses making space for the former. It is in relation to such complex, and contradictory, articulations that both the political reading, and the pleasures, of popular texts need to be understood.

Conclusion

The action cinema is a space in which black performers have had a greater involvement than other Hollywood genres. However, the genre has involved a set of images and stereotypes which have associated black Americans with either stoic sacrifice or criminality. This chapter has argued that a category of blackness has a symbolic centrality to the Hollywood action cinema. The articulation of racial discourse is not separable from, but intertwined with notions of gendered and sexual identities. The buddy movie has offered one format in which men work together, not despite but at the expense of racial difference. This discussion demonstrates the difficulties

involved in countering a long history of stereotypical racial discourse in the Hollywood cinema. The adoption of the bi-racial buddy format can be seen as both an ideological and a market-based strategy (see Guerrero in Diawara ed. 1993). The chapter which follows considers the operation of genre against the context of contemporary, 'new' Hollywood.

CHAPTER THREE: NEW HOLLYWOOD, GENRE AND THE ACTION CINEMA

Introduction

This chapter explores the category of genre within the new Hollywood, examining its status within the transformed structures of the contemporary American film industry. The relevance of postmodernism to understanding such changes is addressed. With reference to the film Die Hard it is argued that an ideological analysis of content is not always sufficient for a consideration of the popular cinema, which should also explore emotion and tone and in the case of the action cinema, the spectacular qualities of the action as well as the concerns of narrative. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of Last Action Hero which operates as both an action film and a comedy about the conventions of the genre.

New Hollywood, Genre and Postmodernism

The aesthetic and industrial development of Hollywood cinema in recent years provides an important context for thinking about the action cinema. An examination of contemporary American film production reveals both changes and continuities with the 'classic Hollywood' of the past. New Hollywood films work to stitch together sometimes seemingly contradictory genres, styles and star images from past and present in a variety of complex ways. The term bricolage, with its sense of the creative play of

postmodernism, captures something of the infinite, and often far from playful, recycling of which the mass media ^{are} ~~is~~ capable, indeed on which it thrives. Bricolage is a term more often invoked as a characteristic of postmodern art, rather than popular practice, or with reference to the consumption of the popular as a form of production in itself.

Involving the collection and transformation of disparate elements, bricolage signals the ways in which audiences can appropriate, and in the process redefine, aspects of popular culture. Thus, whilst the language of postmodernism has often been used to address the world of high art practice, or the audiences-as-producers of popular culture, only selective examples of popular cinema have been associated with the term. (1) Notions of postmodern culture have been used to analyse specific cinematic developments, for example the reprise of film noir in films such as Body Heat (Lawrence Kasden, 1981) in the early 1980s, rather than allowing the formulation of a more general theory of the popular cinema within a postmodern context. (2) How then, might the language and debates associated with postmodernism prove useful in an analysis of the contemporary American cinema as a mass medium?

The fragmentation of aesthetic boundaries has been central to ideas of a postmodern culture. Such fragmentation has

been analysed in terms of intertextuality, in an attention to the complex relations between media and texts, as well as with reference to the chaotic visual devices at work in forms such as music video. Aesthetic fragmentation has, in turn, a central significance for thinking about the functioning of contemporary popular genres. Generic production and criticism, after all, depends on the construction of boundaries between forms. Conceptualising the popular, which is to say generic or formulaic, cinema has always presented problems of definition for critics. Not least because critical methods and evaluative criteria have been evolved and employed primarily in relation to high art. Further, genre is itself a mobile category. The bounds of generic purity cannot be clearly drawn within an industrial context which is constantly developing, shifting the terms of popular narrative. Generic production functions through the play of familiarity and difference, rather than the repeated enactment of any static criteria. (3) The development of generic hybrids, along with other forms of intertextuality, adds a further layer of complexity to the workings of genre in the contemporary Hollywood cinema.

The term 'Hollywood' now seems something of a misnomer, no longer a site of production but an imaginary space which is itself relentlessly referred to within American and other films. The 'collapse' of the studio system, which made way

for ~~a~~ myriad ~~of~~ independent production companies, forms only one aspect of the development of a new Hollywood cinema over the last thirty years. 'Independent' production, a term which still carries connotations of an oppositional film practice, encompasses a range which spans the Australian production of Mad Max (George Miller, 1979), a film which successfully cut into American markets, to The Evil Dead (Sam Raimi, 1982), a cult success put together on a shoestring, and Rambo III with its rumoured \$60 million budget and massive promotional backing. The development of companies set up to oversee the production of a single film project represents one vital economic aspect of the contemporary industry. (4) This has been accompanied by the fine-tuning of the sequel into a distinct form, with films made back to back or featuring endings which allow for the characters return to the screen. The 1970s, and more spectacularly the 1980s, have seen some memorable sequel cycles ranging from the Star Wars trilogy and five Rocky films, to horror cycles, such as A Nightmare On Elm Street (Wes Craven, 1984) and its sequels, and the comic Police Academy series. The Nightmare On Elm Street films have in addition generated a television series, Freddy's Nightmares, as well as an extensive range of associated merchandising. (5)

Such industrial and formal developments have been understood in a variety of ways. (6) One factor we might

usefully point to, in thinking about the development of the action cinema, is the vitality of the video market. The video market has allowed for the production and distribution of low to medium budget action films. Here success, on a modified scale is possible for both films and stars. Alongside films released for the first time through video, the technology also allows cinematic releases a second chance to make money and reach a different audience to those which they might address in the cinema. (7)

Similarly, new action stars of the 1980s and 1990s like Jean-Claude Van Damme or Dolph Lundgren, gradually acquired their reputation and following through video. Thus the video market offers a range of low to medium budget films which can showcase new performers. Such productions sit alongside cinematic events such as Terminator 2, films with an extremely high visibility in the mainstream market. The availability of video technology represents a distinctive shift in the distribution and production of images. The possibilities offered by video as a form, with its domestic context, and fast forward and replay facilities, also operates as an eloquent image for cultural critics concerned to champion the audience's potential appropriation of popular culture. (8)

Cultural criticism of recent years, which highlights the diverse uses that audiences make of popular forms, provides a valuable qualification to a political understanding of

popular texts as an uncontested space for the play of dominant ideology. This work has also allowed an address to the complex ways in which marginalised audiences have long sought to position themselves within a visual culture that denies their existence. (9) Nonetheless, the language of postmodernism often seems to evade crucial questions as to the political status of popular images within a context in which access to the media at the level of production remains limited. Critics and audiences may delight in the self-referential play of popular texts, the surreal qualities of prime-time television or, as a more specific example, Ridley Scott's construction of stylised, imaginary future worlds in films like Alien and Blade Runner (1982). Indeed, the recognition of aesthetic changes across the American cinema in the age of television and video technologies, represents an important critical step. But it is equally important to remember that specific formal devices do not carry an innate or essential meaning. It seems that an equation between aesthetic strategies and political worth, associated in film studies with various theorisations of the classic realist text, is also involved in a critical enthusiasm for the textual rupture and chaos so typical of much contemporary (big-budget) cinema. In drawing attention to this issue, I want to emphasise that the practices and formal features associated with bricolage cannot, any more than modernist framing devices, provide an aesthetic guarantee of the 'progressive'. (10)

Whilst recognising change, we should also take note of continuity. None of the comments above should be taken to imply a view that classic Hollywood did not extensively exploit a range of sources and markets. Star publicity and genre cycles, as well as a variety of tie-ins, capitalised on previous successes and heightened public interest around particular cinematic releases. An important issue for contemporary film study is precisely how to distinguish the reference and allusion taken by some critics to typify the contemporary American cinema, from the recycling of images in which popular cinema has been engaged throughout its history. Whilst the popular generic cinema tells formulaic stories, genre is nonetheless a complex signifying system. It would be a mistake to hold up for comparison the mythicised simplicity of a cinematic past as against the supposed sophistication of a contemporary vantage point. I do however, wish to acknowledge formal and industrial changes, to point to the ways in which new Hollywood operates within a changed context of production, exhibition and consumption, and to open up some of the implications of this for the analysis of contemporary American cinema culture. In this sense, developments in film production and changes in the economic and institutional organisation of Hollywood, seem at times to have outstripped developments in film studies. The classic Hollywood that has for so long been the object of study has gradually disappeared from view, appearing only as a set of

flickering images on the television sets which repeatedly feature in the productions of those cine-literate new Hollywood directors. Yet sub-genres or cycles, such as the recent group of movies centred on serial killers, or rape revenge movies, appear out of the larger generic histories of 'horror' or 'thriller' movies.

The terms employed by reviewers in describing contemporary action films indicate the diversity of the cinematic field within which they have to locate specific films for their readers. Thus phrases such 'feminist road movie', 'post-apocalyptic thriller' or 'boys-behind-bars action' may refer to genre, but in a qualified way, in order to function more effectively as a guide to the viewer. Generic hybridity can involve the combination of potentially contradictory modes and genres, as in the production of comic horror films, such as Re-Animator (Stuart Gordon, 1985) or Return of the Living Dead (Dan O'Bannon, 1984) during the 1980s. In effect however these hybrids are not contradictory. The key here is the combination of a mode (comedy) with a genre (horror). A genre such as horror is, like the action cinema, defined by both content (the horrific/action) and the viewing experience (terror/excitement in spectacle). Such combinations do involve a level of transformation however, as the terms of a genre shift, taking on new connotations. Many recent action films also integrate comic routines and

one-liners, so that comedy operates as an explicit part of the entertainment. In the Indiana Jones sequence of films this is quite clearly part of an attempt to appeal to both children and adult audiences. Yet comedy is also used in action films with more restrictive certificates, such as the Lethal Weapon films. (11)

Genre criticism developed in part from a populist impulse. This populism is implicit in the desire to study the whole of popular cinema, rather than selected examples which can then be constituted as exceptional. Such a study did not necessarily mean producing surveys or taxonomies, but trying to think about popular forms in terms other than those produced by the inappropriate analytical frameworks of high art. (12) In a similar vein, writing in the mid-1970s, Steve Neale argued for the need to develop an understanding of the new Hollywood text equivalent to the vast amount of work undertaken on the classic cinema, so that its 'rules and meanings, and hence its gaps and spaces' might be understood (Neale 1976: 122). Such an analysis is only gradually emerging. Some critics, such as Robin Wood and Andrew Britton, have attempted to generalise about the period, commenting on the political characteristics of popular American cinema in the 1980s. These writings, in particular the accusation of new right conservatism levelled by Britton against popular films of the period, provide an interesting way into the more general critical

field in which the action film has been situated. The action cinema was debated during the 1980s almost exclusively in terms of an imputed ideological conservatism.

For Britton, there is no difference between the majority of film texts that he considers, and dismisses, in his elaboration of a notion of 'Reaganite Entertainment'. He asserts, for example, that the

structure, narrative movement, pattern of character relationships and ideological tendency of Star Wars, Tron [Steven Lisberger, 1982] and Krull [Peter Yates, 1983] are identical in every particular: the variations, if that is the word, are mechanical and external (Britton 1986: 2).

Britton situates his remarks within the changed production context of Hollywood, a context which no longer allows for a complex use 'of standardised generic motifs' typical of classic Hollywood. For Britton 'genre', with all the productivity it implies, is no longer an appropriate term with which to discuss the American cinema, a cinema which he sees as essentially based on repetition. The charge of repetition has often been levelled at the action cinema. Films such as Rambo and Missing in Action (Joseph Zito, 1984) are criticised for their predictability, as well as for an ideological and political complacency. Both Wood and Britton share the view that the 1980s was, by and large, a period of utter cinematic banality. For Wood 'reassurance is the keynote' and, he comments, 'one

immediately reflects that this is the era of sequels and repetition' (Wood 1986: 162). Britton contrasts such repetition to the productive elaboration of conventions that he locates in the classic cinema, with the contemporary cinema representing only a stultifying sameness. Here the formulaic present is contrasted with a more creative past.

For both Britton and Wood a suspicion of repetition and sameness is tied into the popularity of the big-budget cinema of spectacle that developed in the late 1970s and through the 1980s. In particular, they single out those films associated with Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, as well as the cheaper imitations that followed them. Such films include Star Wars, the Indiana Jones films, ET (Steven Spielberg, 1982) and the disaster movie (Britton pinpoints The Towering Inferno (John Guillermin, 1974) as a symptom of decline). The distinction between the cinemas of the past and present has repeatedly been drawn in terms of a certain 'knowing' quality, a knowledge of cinema and popular culture which is shared between filmmakers, film texts and the audiences which they address. Both Wood and Britton see the development of self-referential forms of entertainment as ultimately in the service of a right-wing ideological project of hegemonic self-effacement. Wood indicates how 'peculiarly difficult' it is to discuss such films 'seriously', since they 'set up a deliberate

resistance' to analysis. Indeed 'they are so insistently not serious, so knowing about their own escapist fantasy/pure entertainment nature' that they 'consistently invite the audience's complicity in this' (Wood 1986: 164). Films such as Star Wars are seen to infantilise their audience, an effect that is achieved in part through their very self-referentiality, their awareness of themselves as fiction and as spectacle. (13)

These negative accounts can perhaps be situated in relation to the relative optimism expressed about an experimental strain in American films of the late 1960s and early 1970s. During that period 'new Hollywood' can be taken to refer either to the development of an American art cinema associated with directors such as Altman or Coppola, or to the form that Thomas Schatz sees as characteristic, the blockbuster (in Collins et.al. eds, 1993). The blockbuster represents a very particular response to the declining cinema attendances of the post-war period. With its emphasis on action and spectacle it is also crucial to the changing fate, and the move into bigger budgets, of the action cinema.

For a more positive view of new Hollywood we can turn to Jim Collins' recent comments on 'genericity in the 90s'. Here Collins situates the self-conscious qualities of Hollywood product as a response to postmodernity,

specifically to 'the media-saturated landscape of contemporary American culture' (Collins et.al. eds 1993: 243). Genre, it is argued, functions differently within the transformed industry of the post-classical cinema. Audience fragmentation, the proliferation of 'entertainment options' and the easy availability of images through domestic video technology has, it is claimed, redefined genre. Thus Collins is unwilling to place the return of the western in a traditional understanding of generic development, taking place in stages. Instead he argues that:

The 'recyclability' of texts from the past, the fact that once-forgotten popular texts can now be 'accessed' almost at will changes the cultural function of genre films past and present' (ibid: 246)

Collins suggests that an increasingly substantial part of the experiences which the cinema represents in mythical fashion are those of the highly mediated postmodern world. He contends that the very qualities of contemporary images which are found to be so negative by critics who mourn the passing of classical cinema, work to represent the complexities of contemporary existences. In turn he criticises a form of critical nostalgia for the imagined unity of the classical cinema.

Collins begins his essay by citing two recent films, Back to the Future 3 (Robert Zemeckis, 1989) and Dances with Wolves (Kevin Costner, 1990), films which then come to

stand in for two variants of the contemporary western - one parodic and eclectic, the other marked by a 'new sincerity'. This polemic juxtaposition is both productive and also, to some extent, false. False since Back to the Future 3 is not primarily a western but a comedy which uses the iconography of the western as its backdrop. The use of western iconography for comic effect depends, as Collins argues, on a familiarity which is produced in part by our ability to access the texts of the past alongside those of the present. It may also be the case that the generation of comedy through a play with generic expectations is more commonplace in 'new' than in classic Hollywood. However, in arguing against a three-stage decline and fall structure (the consolidation of generic conventions, a golden age, self-parody and decline) Collins is pitting himself against a rather simplistic way of understanding genre. In offering two extremes of parody and sincerity, Collins seems to replicate the very model of genre that he rejects later in his argument. If genre is understood as a complex signifying system then its continual re-invention becomes comprehensible.

For Britton and Wood the self-reflexivity of the Hollywood cinema of the 1970s and 1980s is problematic. For Collins it indicates the complexity of the contemporary media landscape. In order to understand the functioning of genre within the contemporary cinema we need to take into account

the relationship between on the one hand the work of genre as a system of production and consumption, on the other 'high concept' and the package-unit system of production. The former is associated with classic Hollywood, the latter with new Hollywood. In production terms genre clearly functions differently outside the studio system, yet it also continues as an important frame of reference. This can be exemplified by a brief discussion of another recent western, Jonathan Kaplan's Bad Girls (1994). By contrast to Collins' example, Back to the Future 3, the film does not function as a parody of the western. Indeed Bad Girls fits neither of Collins' polemic categories. The film draws upon and re-articulates the iconography, themes and narrative elements of the western genre without functioning as an exercise in either parody or sincerity. At the same time however, its use of women as central characters involves a shift in the terms of the genre at some level.

Bad Girls was marketed as a (sexy) feminist western. The film is clearly understandable in terms of high concept: a western told from a female perspective featuring known performers, Madeleine Stowe, Mary Stuart Masterson, Drew Barrymore and Andie MacDowell. (14) In this context we can understand the film's rather exploitative aspects - the sexualised display of the female leads in their various prostitute's costumes, the hints of an undeveloped lesbian

relationship between Lilly and Eileen, the images of sexual violence.

The fact that women are central to the western landscape is not however offered as comic - they are not out of place. Certainly Bad Girls betrays self-consciousness about its project - most evident in its references to Johnny Guitar (Nicholas Ray, 1954). This is fundamentally different however from the parody of the western found in Back to the Future 3, which literally takes the teenage hero back to the 'old west', deriving humour from the juxtaposition of his movie-derived expectations and twentieth-century knowledge with the 'reality' of that time and place. Bad Girls introduces the figure of the independent woman and the themes associated with her - such as the struggle to be independent from men - into the western setting. This struggle is charted through the importance of self-reliance, already an important theme of the genre. The women's stories as they gradually emerge relate to familiar narratives in which women take on 'male' responsibilities. Cody Zamora/Madeleine Stowe's past involves a gang of outlaws who picked her up as a teenager. Anita/Mary Stuart Masterson travelled west with her husband to stake a claim. His death leaves her without legal claim to their land. Eileen/Andie MacDowell left her father's small Texas farm which was taken by the bank. Lilly/Drew Barrymore was left with the debts of her father's Wild West show. These

stories leave the women rootless in the manner of the classic western hero. At the level of providing motivation for their outlaw status the film combines the women's anger at the sexual violence to which they are subject with longstanding western themes of the individual pitted against the banks, the law and small-town morality. Though the film's 'novelty value' was undoubtedly central to its marketing, Bad Girls also depends to an extent on a generic basis for its intelligibility.

Ideological Analysis, Generic Awareness and 'Die Hard'

The question of the audience's position in relation to the text has become increasingly significant for cultural criticism. Britton emphasises a changed context of production. Alongside this, a changed context for consumption should also be assigned a significance. It is in this context that Collins polemic, with its emphasis on the changing media landscape, proves valuable. Aside from some desultory remarks on the audience for horror, the analysis of 1980s cinema that Britton offers seems instead to negate issues of consumption, assuming the audience to be both unified and passively positioned by the text. This is, in turn, precisely the critical paradigm through which the action cinema has been most often addressed. Though their political suspicions of the self-aware cinema of spectacle ultimately leads Wood and Britton to dismiss the films, both critics nonetheless attempt to develop an

analysis that is not grounded exclusively in narrative content or structure. Rather, the analyses offered seek to draw attention to the elusive qualities of atmosphere and tone which are crucial for an analysis of a spectacle-based cinema. I am not suggesting that an attention to narrative content is critically invalid, but that other elements of the films are equally important, particularly in the context of an analysis of the popular, entertainment cinema. Such an analysis necessarily involves an attention to the experience of cinema.

The structural analysis of narrative reveals how the vast number of stories which are told in popular culture can ultimately be reduced to a few narrative elements, which are combined and articulated in a variety of forms. Repetition is at the heart of both the significance and the pleasures of narrative. Yet the repetition that is involved in genre is also bound up in difference, and if all popular films appear to look the same, then film criticism may well be viewing them through an inappropriate framework. Whilst the location of the action cinema within the broad sweep of generic analysis is important, a detailed attention to the texts of popular culture is also fundamental to the understanding of any form. Rowena Chapman comments that 'a glance at a clutch of recent films and soaps' will illustrate the points about gender relations in the 1980s that she wishes to make (Chapman and

Rutherford (eds) 1988: 243-7). For Chapman it seems the ideological project is so obvious, so easily diagnosed, that there is no need to look closely: a 'glance' suffices. Such a gloss is evident in a great deal of journalistic and academic commentaries on popular cinema and television. This is related in part to the need to give overviews, to summarise ideas within a few paragraphs, yet it also indicates the assumption that critics can unproblematically read off an understanding of something as complex as, for example, the articulation of gender in a given moment in history, from a glance at a few images. My point is not to single out Chapman in particular, but to think about the implications of such a common practice for the study of popular culture. To suggest that meanings are obvious, necessarily excludes something of the complexity of popular films. As good products, efficient commodities, films are polysemic, speaking to or excluding different audiences in different ways.

Directed by John McTiernan and starring Bruce Willis, Die Hard (1988) centres on the Nakatomi Corporation's building in Los Angeles, which is taken over by group of assorted European 'terrorists' who are confronted by New York policeman John McClane. The film exemplifies both classic and new Hollywood techniques. In its narrative and stylistic construction the film is astonishingly tight. In this sense Die Hard functions as a classical narrative with

all the elements introduced in its initial scenes having a significance that is ultimately revealed by the end of the film. Holly/Bonnie Bedelia's rolex, a reward for and symbol of her achievements within the Nakatomi Corporation, is finally unclasped by husband McClane/Willis as the villainous Gruber/Alan Rickman falls to his death. Die Hard is also held together by a range of generic and other references, both visual and verbal. Like classic Hollywood productions, the film depends for its intelligibility on genre. Yet at the same time the film, as do other generic hybrids, operates in a sense beyond the categories to which genre refers. Hybridity, that is, allows films to both draw on and redefine a range of genres, through the forging of new associations between them.

Like Predator, McTiernan's 1987 film, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, which combined the patrol movie with science-fiction/horror, Die Hard looks both backwards and forwards generically speaking. Through its visual and verbal references, the film invokes the police thriller, the Vietnam war movie, the disaster movie and the western. As the Nakatomi building becomes a war zone, the central foyer's showpiece fountain and pool becomes a river/jungle setting from which Willis emerges with machine gun in hand, in a parody of a classic action image. Hans Gruber, Die Hard's chief villain, taunts McClane over the radio in an attempt to discover his identity - 'Just another American

who saw too many movies as a child? An orphan of a bankrupt culture who thinks he's John Wayne, Rambo, Marshal Dillon?'. Gruber finally settles on a contemptuous 'Mr Cowboy'. McClane responds by characterising himself as Roy Rogers, a significantly dandified version of the cowboy. Such an identification already connotes the male body as spectacle, offering up an image of the hero as performing a pre-existing image of masculinity. This kind of self-aware performance fits nicely with Willis' own star image. Characterised by a self-mocking bravado and verbal wit, Willis' image is writ large in his performances in action films such as Hudson Hawk (Michael Lehmann, 1991) and The Last Boy Scout (Tony Scott, 1991), though the latter is much bleaker in tone than the former. This kind of performance also echoes the self-aware aspects of the text's construction, the ways in which Die Hard seeks to position itself within popular culture.

The 1980s action cinema retained and embellished the figure of the hero-as-outsider which has long been a key feature within various traditions of 'heroic' narratives (such as the western and the epic). The populist heroes of the 1970s and 1980s are only very rarely associated with the established forces of state or government. In films such as Die Hard, where the hero is a police officer, they have at best a strained relationship to the police authorities. The hero stands out from and to one side of, the

establishment of which he is a part. Thus Sylvester Stallone in Cobra (1986), though a cop, is not seen in uniform. The image of the uniformed officer is both invoked and undermined in Thelma and Louise, when the two women are stopped by a state trooper who is decked out in macho regalia of sunglasses and emotionless expression. In a comic scene the two apologetically lock him in the trunk of his car. His initial appearance of self-assurance collapses as he begins to cry, a joke constructed, as at other points in the film, through reference to recognisable caricatures of (cinematic) masculine identities.

In the films of the 1980s and early 1990s we see little evidence of the redemptive community which backed up the hero against the state in Frank Capra's celebrated cinematic populism. Thus the hero's only ally in the three Rambo films is the lone, and rather ineffectual, figure of Colonel Trautman. The military does not provide a supportive community for the hero, but instead betrays him.

(15) Chuck Norris's three Missing In Action films, which the star is reported to have described as 'less anti-government' than Stallone's version of the American prisoner of war narrative, negotiate a similar set of problems (in Adair, 1989: 215). These are primarily to do with the construction of any kind of patriotic motivation for a hero who has been betrayed by his country. In Die Hard McClane's interventions are unwelcome not only to the

'terrorists' but to both the Los Angeles police and the FBI. The terrorists' entire plan revolves around the FBI men (Johnson and Johnson) enacting a well-worn operational routine for dealing with a hostage situation ('sounds like an A7 scenario', they remark sagely). This leads them to cut off all power to the building, in the process breaking the final time lock on the company's safe, a lock which cannot be cut from within the building.

The central plot device of Die Hard is based on a mis-recognition. The FBI, thinking the gang are terrorists, act according to the book. In the process, the authorities provide the missing link in the smooth running of the heist. Both the gang and the FBI try to play a double-cross and the lone hero is stranded, caught in the crossfire. This mis-recognition mirrors the problems faced by a traditional political criticism when applied to new Hollywood - the difficulty that Robin Wood finds in taking seriously films which employ a humour that preempts analysis. Maurice Yacowar's 1989 Jump Cut critique of Die Hard functions as a useful example in this respect.

Entitled 'The White Man's Mythic Invincibility', Yacowar reads the film in terms of sexism, racism and xenophobia. The film's narrative is read as a dramatisation of macho self-indulgence which depicts the triumph of the white male hero over female and black characters, as a re-run of Vietnam in which America wins, as a re-run of various other

contemporary films (including First Blood, Rambo and unspecified Chuck Norris movies), and as a dramatisation of the destruction of corporate Japan/Europe by American individualism through the figure of Willis as hero. All of these questions pose important areas for analysis, and they certainly relate to more general trends in popular American fictions - such as fears around a notion of 'Japanization'. Yet I also wish to argue that the articulation of power relations offered in a film like Die Hard is not unproblematically available for the critic to simply read off. Yacowar lays on a template, producing a text book analysis which attempts to sketch the operation of oppressive discourses within the film. In the process such an analysis runs the risk of missing the point, just as the authorities in Die Hard are revealed as incompetent organisation men because they fail to see through the masquerade, fail to grasp that the 'terrorists' are really burglars. One might argue, of course, that in any case Gruber and his team are villains, though this misses the nuances of a play on male identity as different types of performance in the film.

Die Hard's box office success, suggests Yacowar, is 'primarily due to its breakneck action' but, he adds 'it may also be striking a popular nerve in its reactionary politics', for when:

the ruggedly individualist hero thwarts a terrorist take-over of an LA office tower, he lives out a macho

pipedream on two political fronts - the international and the sexual (Yacowar 1989: 2).

Whilst such an analysis is able to speak about levels of meaning, and therefore suggests some complexity, it can fundamentally only admit the existence of two levels - the overt pleasures of the text and the covert ideological project. Whilst the 'open appeal of Die Hard lies in its snappy wit and crisp action' the film:

has a deeper appeal in its political assumptions which speak to the sexist who craves to have his obsolete delusions reaffirmed (Yacowar 1989: 4).

This shift in register, from an acknowledgement of the open appeal of the film to a laying bare of its underlying (reactionary) assumptions is by now a familiar strategy of the ideological analysis. I do not want to suggest that there is nothing to be said about the contemporary cinema at the level of a political analysis. Nor even that these themes are absent from the film. However, I do wish to suggest that this type of ideological reading does not provide a complete account of the pleasures of the popular cinema.

Yacowar maintains a particular idea about the film and what its audience might take from it, partly through the exclusion, the writing out, of the film's black, female and other audiences, and the complexities of the responses that different audiences might have to the film. Die Hard can thus be read as a fantasy of white male dominance rather

than one of, say, empowerment. Elements that do not fit can be conveniently ignored. The film itself to some extent pre-empts such criticism, partly through a certain playfulness. For example, in the film's opening sequences McClane is angry that his wife has chosen to use her own name since moving to LA. By the end of the film he is reconciled to this and introduces her as 'Holly Gennaro'. Yet this is precisely the point at which she accepts his name, correcting him, 'Holly McClane'. The end credits however stand on the fence, listing Bonnie Bedelia's character as 'Holly Gennaro McClane' indicating an awareness of the tangled nature of this final compromise.

That compromise and the representation of conflict between an independent woman and a traditional tough masculinity picks up on Bruce Willis' wise-cracking star image, derived from his role in the television series Moonlighting. The programme centred around a series of verbal confrontations that mediated the sexual tension between Willis and Cybill Shepherd. Whilst Yacowar sees Willis as playing 'roughly the same character' in Die Hard, he suggests that 'in the TV series the light characterisation and self-reflexivity undermine his macho pretensions and authority' whereas 'the larger-screen epic allows them unquestioned sprawl' (Yacowar 1989: 4). Just as Predator turns Schwarzenegger's image around by pitching him against the kind of robotic alien that he played to such effect in The Terminator

(James Cameron, 1984), Die Hard has to negotiate with and, if possible, capitalise on Willis's image. An analysis of such strategies needs to take into account the fact that audiences are in possession of a whole series of extra-textual and intertextual knowledge. That is criticism should recognise that a textual self-reflexivity is in operation, though it may not be as overt, which is to say coded in highly particular ways, as in a television series like Moonlighting.

The view that self-reflexivity functions within popular culture only when it is unmistakable can be seen to complement a more general unease expressed by liberal and left critics when dealing with the action, indeed the popular cinema. To take an example, Derek Malcolm's review of Robocop (Paul Verhoeven, 1987) distinguishes between his own ability to discern the subtleties of director Verhoeven's grim vision, from that of an audience of young people who disturbingly 'delighted in every bit of violence' at the screening he attended (Guardian February 4, 1988). What is significant about this comment, and about critical attitudes to the action cinema, is the notion that narrative content is somehow simply separable from form. Robocop is often referred to as an 'interesting' film precisely for those moments which overtly seek to ironise the dystopic future that the film imagines. Yet the knowing bleakness of Robocop, its

incisive cynicism, is also manifest in its hero's violent fate and his subsequent use of violence. The violence, and particularly the visceral destruction of the hero, form an important part of the film and is not simply a separable element functioning as a crowd pleaser. It is a feature of the populism located in the action cinema that it is the body of the hero and not his voice, his capacity to make rational argument, that is the place of last resort. That the body of the hero is the sole space that is safe, and that even this space is under attack is a theme repeatedly returned to in the action cinema of the period.

Generic Conventions and Comedy: 'Last Action Hero'

Starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and, like Die Hard directed by John McTiernan, Last Action Hero is an aggressive and sometimes disorientating self-reflexive film. Aimed partly at a younger audience it offers spectacular action within a comic format. The object of the comedy is not only the action cinema itself, but Schwarzenegger's role within it. Weaving together a 'film within a film' format with young protagonist Danny/Austin O'Brien's fantasies, Last Action Hero elaborates a dialogue between two fictional spaces - the 'real' world and film fantasy. The real world is represented by the dark, wet and threatening streets of New York where the dilapidated movie theatre that provides Danny's magical entrance to the film world is situated. By contrast the film world - Los Angeles as 'Hollywood' - is

bright and sunny and, as Danny observes, populated with women who are unnaturally beautiful. Confronted at school with a film of Olivier as the vacillating hero Hamlet, Danny imagines a trailer for a film casting Schwarzenegger in the role: Hamlet emerges as decisive, arrogant and destructive ('No one is going to tell this sweet prince good night' runs the voiceover). The real New York police station that Danny visits after a frightening attack on his home is a bleak contrast to the squadroom he visits in the film world. There Danny is confronted by Sharon Stone in Basic Instinct costume and Robert Patrick from Terminator 2 on the steps, and by an animated cat and a black and white Humphrey Bogart inside.

As characters cross between these fictional spaces a commentary emerges on the relative status of the two. Film hero Jack Slater/Arnold Schwarzenegger finds his powers limited once he enters the real world. Here breaking glass with his bare hands causes pain: here he can be killed. In the glamorous film world Danny finds out that his hero Slater is tired and confused, grieving for his son (killed in Jack Slater III), regretful that his daughter Whitney is more interested in weapons and martial arts than boys, paying someone to phone the station pretending to be his ex-wife. Throughout the film the conventions of heroism are debunked at the same time as they are on display, as

the film plays out its spectacular action sequences of car chases and explosions.

The villainous Benedict/Charles Dance also escapes to the real world, finding that there crime can pay. As the plot becomes more convoluted, Benedict schemes to rid himself of Slater by killing Arnold Schwarzenegger at the premiere of Jack Slater IV, the film in which they are both characters. Thus a meeting between Slater/Schwarzenegger and Schwarzenegger/Schwarzenegger is engineered. While the former is represented as a two-dimensional hero who is revealed through the course of the film to have depth, the latter is portrayed as shallow, offering Slater work as a celebrity lookalike. Slater tells Schwarzenegger 'you've brought me nothing but pain'. For Jonathon Romney:

The film demonstrates what, after all, we know: Slater has been constructed, but so has Arnie, whose persona, no less than his body, is 'built'. Arnie as cop, as Hamlet, as 'Arnie' are all on the same level, sharing the same cartoon consistency (Romney 1993: 9).

In mobilising these different manifestations the film treads a difficult line. The fact that it was a relative failure at the box office might perhaps be attributed to its too tortuous debunking of the heroic figure. (16)

Taking his cue from the film's title, Romney uses Last Action Hero to pronounce the demise of the action cinema thus:

The action genre is itself worn out, because it has run through all its possibilities; and the genre fan,

thoroughly schooled in its conventions by Danny's running exegesis, may never be able to watch another example of the genre again. The film does indeed, represent a pre-emptive act of hubris on the part of its makers, who are effectively ensuring that we will never take seriously a Die Hard III, a Lethal Weapon IV, a Terminator 3 (ibid.).

Yet like the resurgence of the western that followed the supposed end of the western, the action cinema continues.

Schwarzenegger followed the failure of Last Action Hero with the successful True Lies (James Cameron, 1994) which is discussed in the conclusion to this dissertation.

Whilst pronouncements on the end of a genre are problematic, Romney's comments raise a pertinent issue. The generic territory of the action cinema is fantasy. In both its heroic figures and its visual effects the genre offers the pleasures of exaggeration and spectacle. As I discuss in the chapters that follow many contemporary action films use comedy, often directed precisely at generic conventions. The problems faced by Last Action Hero might in this sense be related to its attempts to parody a genre in which parody already plays an important role.

Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that genre continues to function as a system within new Hollywood, but that it is also a transformed system. The three films discussed in this chapter all depend on genre. Bad Girls inflects the western with its use of female characters. Die Hard operates as a hybrid which brings together a range of

action genres. Last Action Hero operates as a comedy about the nature of the genre and, in particular, the version of heroism that is offered within it. In the chapters that follow I discuss in more detail the articulation of masculinities in the action cinema. I also go on to develop my contention that an ideological analysis based on narrative should be qualified by an attention to non-narrative elements.

CHAPTER FOUR: MASCULINITIES AND STAR IMAGES IN THE ACTION CINEMA: THE BODY AND THE VOICE

Introduction

The box-office success of the white male bodybuilder as star has been one of the most visible aspects of recent American action cinema. The visibility of the built male body, in both film and advertising images, represents part of a wider shift in the male image, and in the range of masculine identities, that are on offer in western popular culture. This chapter discusses such identities through an examination of star images. In particular the different definitions of a strong masculinity through emphases on the body and the voice are examined.

Masculinities and Stars in the Action Cinema: Defining

Terms

In the action cinema the figure of the bodybuilder as star can be contrasted to the male stars of the Hong Kong action tradition, in which an elaborate, quick-fire, physical performance has come to form a central part of the visual pleasure that is on offer. The distinction is between images of the body in action, so central to fight films, and images of the top-heavy, almost statuesque, figure of the bodybuilder who essentially strikes poses within an action narrative. This distinction clearly has implications for the kinds of action, and the sorts of display, that action films offer. American films such as

Universal Soldier (Roland Emmerich, 1992) which showcase the western kickboxing star Jean-Claude Van Damme, for example, are increasingly moving away from the emphasis on contact fighting found in his Hong Kong films, replacing this with an emphasis on the built muscular body. (1)

The moves through which bodybuilders became film stars through the 1980s, whilst other male stars began to build their bodies, offers a site through which to explore the changing articulation of masculinities in the contemporary action cinema. This needs to be set against a cinematic context in which narratives of fatherhood and family life, in films as diverse as Parenthood, The Good Father (Mike Newell, 1986), Parents (Bob Balaban, 1988) and The Stepfather (Joseph Ruben, 1986), have proved extremely popular. Images of the built male body, that is, form only one part of the new visibility that surrounds male bodies and masculine identities within both popular culture and academic inquiry.

The political meaning of these images has, in turn, been fiercely contended. The proliferation of images of the built male body represents for Barbara Creed the kind of deconstructive performativity associated with postmodernism, whilst for others they articulate, in their 'promotion of power and the fear of weakness', traditional images which are also 'deeply reactionary' (Foster 1988:

61). The relationship between star image, genre and masculinity is considered in this chapter through an examination of specific star images. Within the action cinema the advent of the bodybuilder as star poses quite complex questions for the development of narrative, largely to do with the need to incorporate moments of physical display. The bodybuilder also offers specific formulations of an heroic male identity in the cinema, formulations which are explored below with reference to two key muscular stars of recent years, Schwarzenegger and Stallone. The films in which these stars appear draw on comedy, and, in stark contrast, on those Christian traditions of representation which offer up the suffering white male body as spectacle. These modes have been continued and developed in the films of more recent action stars, such as Dolph Lundgren and Jean-Claude Van Damme.

As the title of this chapter indicates though, the heroes of contemporary action cinema are to an extent polarised between an emphasis on the body and on the voice. The strong silent type finds his complement in the kind of wise-cracking action hero played by Bruce Willis in films like Die Hard, Hudson Hawk (1991) and The Last Boy Scout. Whilst these are still big-budget spectacular films, Willis is known for his voice as much as his body. His role in these films as a 'wise-guy' enacts a different kind of masculine performance to that associated with the

bodybuilder. The relationship between the body and the voice is central to the action cinema's articulation of male identity. Involving questions surrounding the ability to speak and act, which are also inevitably questions of power, an attention to the relationship between the body and the voice brings to the fore questions of race and class, as well as the more apparent issues of gendered identity through which the muscular action stars have been discussed.

The figures referred to thus far are differently positioned as stars, actors and performers, with these three terms bearing very different connotations of both masculine and artistic identity. Schwarzenegger and Stallone, for example, are very much movie stars, complex personae made up of far more than the texts in which they appear. The star image exceeds the films and other media that showcase it, is cut loose for an unofficial existence within complex circuits of signification. Chuck Norris is perceived much more as ^aperformer~~s~~, his talents in the cinema deriving from a showcasing of martial arts skill. The possibilities of shifting from one category to another, or existing across them, is indicated by Schwarzenegger, who initially became famous within the world of bodybuilding, though he is now known primarily as a movie star. Similarly, Jean-Claude Van Damme has moved, during the course of this research, from the Hong Kong produced fight films which emphasised

martial arts to the status of star, mythicised in the slow motion sequences of Hard Target (John Woo, 1993). Harrison Ford, whilst a star who has appeared in a variety of action roles has, as his career has developed, increasingly been seen as an actor. (2)

The different cultural capital associated with stars, performers and actors is a factor which recurs throughout cultural criticism, as well as forming a key part of the American cinema's discourse about itself. Action stars, for example, often express a desire to be 'taken seriously' as actors and/or as filmmakers. In part these protestations relate to the impossibility of carrying on physically-based performances indefinitely. As the musclemen stars of the 1980s begin to creep into middle age, they can be seen to be seeking a new niche for themselves, just as female stars have, for so long, needed to redefine themselves as they age. Thus Rocky finally retires, after a fashion, in Rocky V (John G Avildsen, 1990). Whilst an aging Clint Eastwood built up his body for Heartbreak Ridge, he has also continued to develop his career as a director and has taken on more 'dramatic' roles. His age and physical limitations are emphasised and incorporated into the plot of the recent In The Line Of Fire. (3) More strikingly, action star Mel Gibson took on the key classical actor's role of Hamlet in Zeffirelli's

film version, before returning to the part of Martin Riggs for Lethal Weapon 3 (Richard Donner, 1992).

Within western traditions the definition of a 'good' cinematic actor centres largely on the ability to develop the sustained portrayal of a complex character. Set against such a standard, neither the action cinema, nor the performers who feature in it, have fared very well in critical terms. The enactment of the role of the action hero requires a different set of qualities and, despite critical disdain, remains hugely successful at the box-office. As a male star who made the transition to being 'taken seriously' during the mid 1980s much more successfully than most, Harrison Ford is an interesting figure for analysis. Though he had already appeared in several films, the role which made Ford a major star was that of Han Solo in Star Wars and its two sequels. Here he plays the part of the action hero, a persona he took on once more as adventurer and archaeologist Indiana Jones in Raiders of the Lost Ark and its sequels.

Indiana Jones is an action hero who is successful with women, knowledgeable, quick-witted and physically strong. He is also very clearly positioned in the past, constructed with nostalgic reference to past cinematic fictions and, possibly, past masculine ideals. As an action hero who wears glasses (though only sometimes) Jones displays, like

the character of Solo, both a physical and a verbal agility. This wisecracking image made it easier for Ford to make 'serious' films like Witness (1985) and Mosquito Coast (1986) with director Peter Weir. In addition of course, Ford starred in one of the few action films of the period to achieve critical acclaim, Ridley Scott's Blade Runner. This film, with its implicit social criticism, carefully orchestrated visual style and references to valorised moments of cinema history such as film noir, takes its place within that part of the popular cinema that is able to pass as high culture. (4)

The phenomenon of stardom provides a useful starting point for thinking about the performative aspects of masculinity in the cinema, perhaps because spectacle, performance and acting all function as both constitutive components of stardom and significant terms in writings concerned with the sexual politics of representation. Within the action cinema the figure of the star as hero, larger than life in his physical abilities and pin-up good looks, operates as a key aspect of the more general visual excess that this particular form of Hollywood production offers to its audience. Along with the visual pyrotechnics, the military array of weaponry and hardware, the arch-villains and the staggering obstacles the hero must overcome, the overblown budgets, the expansive landscapes against which the drama is acted out and the equally expansive soundtracks, is the

body of the star as hero, characteristically functioning as spectacle. Indeed it is this explosive and excessive cinematic context that provides a setting for, even allows, the display of the white male body. Such display generates a range of uncertainties, as traditional signifiers of a masculine, colonial power are constituted as sexual spectacle. Sexuality, so often displaced within western images onto a 'savage' landscape which awaits colonisation and civilisation by the white hero, is more explicitly invested in the muscular body of the white male star. (5)

Richard Dyer locates the 'central paradox' of stardom as the instability of 'the whole phenomenon' which is 'never at a point of rest or equilibrium, constantly lurching from one formulation of what being human is to another' (Dyer 1987: 18). Particular star images are no more stable than the phenomenon as a whole. Embracing contradictory elements and constantly shifting, star images present themselves as composed of so many layers, as so many slippages between fantasised, fictional identities and the supposed guarantee provided by the star's 'actual' embodiment of those identities. Performances in films, gossip in newspapers and magazines, publicity that is both sought and unlooked for: all these elements work to constantly displace and reconfirm our understanding in an endlessly played out revelation of 'the truth behind the image'. In this sense the territory of the star image is

also the territory of identity, the process of the forging and reforging of ways of 'being human', or of 'being a man', in which a point of certainty is never ultimately arrived at.

In this shifting landscape of identity, stars nonetheless perform, or more properly constitute through performance, particular types. 'John Wayne' signifies not only this particular star's image, but a type of masculine and political identity. Thus in Predator 2, Danny Glover's character is accused of having a 'John Wayne attitude' to law enforcement, a phrase which draws on a wide, though not absolute, concurrence of understandings of what that attitude is. (6) Invoking Wayne, who is often taken as an embodiment of a hawkish, white masculinity, to describe Glover's character also adds a complex racial dimension to this particular version of a cop in conflict with police bureaucracy.

Muscle Culture: The Bodybuilder as Hero and Star

The hero of the action narrative is often cast as a figure who lacks a place within the community for which he fights, a paradox familiar from the Western genre. (7) In the recent action cinema problems of location and position are increasingly articulated through the body of the male hero. In this sense the figure of the bodybuilder as star has a special significance, raising here a more general set of

issues to do with activity and passivity and their relation to masculinity and femininity in film. These issues centre on the problematic aspects of the construction of the male body as spectacle, an issue that has generated much commentary and criticism. The male pin-up is certainly of a different order to the female pin-up, shot through with a different set of anxieties, difficulties and pleasures.

Richard Dyer links these uncertainties to the problematic processes through which male power is maintained in western culture, processes that involve the disavowal of the very fact that the man is being looked at, and the use of an insistent imagery which stresses hardness, partly through muscularity, a quality traditionally associated with masculinity. Dyer's analysis draws attention to the way in which any display of the male body needs to be compensated for by the suggestion of action. Thus sports pin-ups and the portrayal of the feats of near-naked action heroes both offer the body as to-be-looked-at whilst refusing the 'femininity' implied by that quite passive position (Dyer 1982). This work provides a useful framework for analysis, and may tell us something about the choice of the action movie as one of the privileged spaces for the display of the male body.

An analysis of the figure of the male bodybuilder as film star, also needs to acknowledge that as the muscular hero

is caught by the camera, he is both posed and in motion at the same time. The medium serves to emphasise the contradictions that Dyer finds in the male pin-up. The combination of passivity and activity in the figure of the bodybuilder as action star is central to the articulation of gendered identity in the films in which they appear. It also represents one of the distinctive qualities of these films. This combination allows us to problematise any clear set of distinctions between passivity, femininity and women on the one hand and activity, masculinity and men on the other. The figure of the muscleman hero dramatises the instability of these categories and equations, combining qualities associated with masculinity and femininity, qualities which gender theory maintains in a polarised binary.

Bodybuilding as a sport is defined by pleasurable display, but is also criticised as clumsy or ugly, as precisely lacking in the classical grace to which it aspires. It is sometimes seen as positively pathological. An article in the Sunday Times in 1988, speculating on a link between the 'Rambo cult and sex crimes', points to the cases of various murders and rapists, seen by the writer as 'social misfits who spent hours in front of a mirror, flexing muscles or posing in combat gear'. (8) Bodybuilding is here taken to signal a disturbing narcissism, a narcissism which is inappropriate to familiar definitions of manhood. In other

words the bodybuilder, obsessed with his appearance as he is, is not a real man. This pathologising discourse is quite familiar, perhaps contextualising the uncertain tone of George Butler's documentary Pumping Iron (1977) in which the heterosexuality of the bodybuilders interviewed and portrayed is repeatedly reaffirmed. Heterosexuality here operates as a more general sign of 'normality', denying the supposed perversity of a man's interest in male flesh.

In some senses the bodybuilder is precisely unnatural, since he is so clearly marked as manufactured.

Bodybuilding offers the possibility of self-creation, in which the intimate space of the body is produced as a raw material to be worked on and worked over, ultimately for display on a public stage. Thus critics have seen stars like Stallone and Schwarzenegger as 'performing the masculine', drawing attention to masculinity and the male body by acting out an excessive caricature of cultural expectations. Barbara Creed, for example, speculates on these figures as:

simulacra of an exaggerated masculinity, the original completely lost to sight, a casualty of the failure of the paternal signifier and the current crisis in master narratives (Creed 1987: 65).

The 'current crisis in master narratives' is not seen by Creed as the inability to tell a story, but in terms of the failing of the key terms around which stories are constructed, terms which include a coherent white male

heterosexuality, along with the rationality and binary structures it is often taken to propose.

For Creed it is the sheer physical excess of the muscular stars that indicates the performative status of the masculinity they enact. If bodybuilding draws attention to different ways of being a man, to definitions of manhood, it has also been characterised, along with any male concern with the body and appearance, as feminised and rather ridiculous. As I discuss in chapter seven, women's involvement in the sport is conversely seen to masculinise them. For both men and women, the activity has been characterised as perverse in that bodybuilding, as a practice and in its results, transgresses supposedly 'normal' gendered behaviour.

The ridicule directed at bodybuilding stems in part from the ambiguous status of the musculature in question - what is it all for? As one critic commented these 'baroque muscles' are, after all, 'largely, non-functional decoration' (Walsh and Louvre (eds) 1988: 96). They do not relate to the active function that the hero is called on to perform, indeed can be seen as positively disabling. Rather muscles serve as just one component of the excessive visual display that characterises the action cinema. Producer Mario Kassar is reported to have jokingly said of the search for a location for Rambo III (a search which

eventually led to 'Afghanistan') that "It's got to be hot so Stallone can show off his body". If this comment functions partly at the level of a joke, it is also telling in other ways. Stallone has been insistently framed and marketed in terms of the body. One of the publicity images for Rambo III self-consciously punned on the phrase 'Stallone's Back' heralding both his return as Rambo and the stylised visual image of his body.

It is this emphasis on the body which distinguishes a muscular cinema from other action films, though other features may be held in common. Stallone functions quite clearly as an object of spectacle both as a film star and within muscle culture. Muscle and Fitness magazine lovingly describes his workout with a feature in which he is set up as an example of the 'Great Body', getting the cover story and a pin-up centrefold. The text on the cover invites, or challenges, the reader to consider 'How Masculine are You?', promising also to reveal the star's secrets - 'Stallone: How He Gets Muscular' (June 1989). Body culture, as manifest in magazines like this, represents a vast, and expanding, industry selling a variety of products to aspirant bodybuilders.

The industry surrounding bodybuilding plays on male insecurities in a form that could be seen as analogous to the ways in which women are addressed by beauty culture.

Male readers are asked to judge themselves against the bodies portrayed in the pages of muscle magazines. The presentation of the male body as commodity represents, then, the creation of new markets for a consumer culture. The commodification of the male body that is involved in this process, could be read as 'contained' within the framing narrative images of male activity, the activity of 'working out'. Alternatively, the two, contradictory, processes can be seen as working together in the images generated by body culture.

This kind of commodification also intersects with, and draws upon, a long history of representation in which the terms of class and race are mapped over the male body, with sports, for example, traditionally providing an arena for working class men and for black men to succeed. Within these terms, we might note that the kinds of male body - black and white working class - that have traditionally been displayed within western culture are those that are already sexualised, perceived through an accumulated history of sexual myths and stereotypes. The body is constituted through such myths, written through the terms of sex, class and race. Within the action cinema, these male bodies also tell powerful stories of subjection and resistance, so that muscles function both to give the action hero the power to resist, at the same time as they

confirm him in a position that defines him almost exclusively through the body.

As with the figure of the showgirl that Laura Mulvey (1989) refers to in classic Hollywood films, contemporary American action films work hard, and often at the expense of narrative development, to contrive situations for the display of the hero's body. If the performance of a show functioned to produce the showgirl as spectacle, then the equivalent sites of the action film are the gym, a space for rehearsal, and the arena for a fight, whether that be the boxing ring or a more expansive 'natural' setting. The other key site which has repeatedly been used to provide a narrative excuse for the hero's nakedness, is not the bedroom but the prison. The prison is also, crucially, a site of punishment, a place designed to separate off those elements perceived as socially undesirable or dangerous. All these sites involve a mapping of themes of punishment and triumphant resistance onto the male body.

In both academic and journalistic commentaries, the built body, male and female, has often been the object of disgust and humour rather than admiration. There is, for example, a marked hostility towards the physical display involved in the films of muscular stars. A feature in the Guardian on Rambo suggests that 'Stallone's only preoccupation in the film is exposing his preposterous body', while his

'enormous breasts loom over the screen like Jane Russell in The Outlaw' and the 'acting is performed mostly by his biceps'. (9) Here both the body, and the desire to display it, are seen as comical. This critic's reference to Stallone's 'enormous breasts' operates to define his masculinity as ridiculous, questioning the status of his maleness through the suggestion that when the male body is displayed it is revealed as womanly. Not only that, the image connects a negative exaggeration of masculinity with a supposedly negative exaggerated femininity - the ~~enor~~ormous breasts. Taking this further, Jeffrey Walsh cites a Times review which playfully describes the camera lingering over Stallone's muscles 'with an abandon not seen on the screen since Joseph von Sternberg made movies with Marlene Dietrich' (Walsh and Louvre (eds) 1988: 56). The Sternberg/Dietrich partnership, referred to here, has formed a central point of reference for a feminist film criticism concerned to explore the work of voyeurism and the sexualised performance constructed around the female star within Hollywood film. (10)

If, for some, the figure of the bodybuilder signals an assertion of male dominance, an eroticising of the powerful male body, for other critics it seems to signal an hysterical and unstable image of manhood. The muscular body of the action star seems to provide a powerful symbol of both desire and lack. The body is offered for display

as both a static object of contemplation and, in the acting out of the hero's achievements, as both subjected and triumphant. In this sense there are no easy links to be made between the action hero, the muscleman and some unproblematic endorsement of a nationalistic macho. With critics caught between breasts and biceps, it is clear that both active and passive, both feminine and masculine terms, inform the imagery of the male body in the action cinema.

Arnold Schwarzenegger: 'Heroism and Health'

With the headline 'Arnold: Fit for Fatherhood' an image of Arnold Schwarzenegger, posed casually and not as a bodybuilder, adorned the cover of the May 1990 issue of the American man's style magazine GQ. Having just been appointed head of the President's Council on Fitness by George Bush, Schwarzenegger is cast here as living out the American dream: he is rich, relaxed and a father. In this profile Alan Richman describes Schwarzenegger as the man who 'transformed the image of body-building from one of excessiveness and narcissism into one of heroism and health' (GQ May 1990: 204). These two poles, of excess and narcissism on the one hand, 'heroic health' on the other, can be seen to provide the limits for the meaning of the muscular male body, both within the cinema and as an image circulated within popular culture more generally.

It is on this fragile tightrope that the muscular hero is poised. The different components which go to make up Schwarzenegger's star image have been given both conventionally positive and negative inflections. In one view, he is the good immigrant, a newcomer to America who amassed a fortune in real estate before going into films. Within the terms of American mythology his wealth signals his positive qualities, his status as an astute businessman. Schwarzenegger's marriage, to a Kennedy, is also a key aspect of his persona here, signifying a certain hyper-normality. That is, not only is he seen to enact the 'normality' of marriage and fatherhood, his marriage to an American celebrity, like the rest of his image, is larger than life. On top of this is the star's evident physical health, which remains a signifier of moral health in western culture. (11) Commando goes to great lengths to present Schwarzenegger/Matrix as 'well adjusted'. Matrix is, in the credit sequence which pictures him with his daughter, seen to be a good father, indulgent if old-fashioned in his foolish comments on Boy George ('Why don't they just call him Girl George?').

Against such 'positive' factors stand the low cultural status of the violent films in which Schwarzenegger has starred, and, in particular, an unease about the political implications of his persona. Indeed the very value that is often attributed to the way in which Arnold Schwarzenegger

constructed himself is sometimes reversed, seen as an overly mechanical enactment of the formula for success. The tone of Ian Penman's profile in the Sunday Correspondent is very much within this mould. Penman sees Schwarzenegger as 'American Fascist Art exemplified, embodied', speaking of the way in which the star 'epitomises the American dream' thus:

an Austrian immigrant with an unwieldy name, he literally built himself up, bit by bit: economics degree, acting lessons, bodybuilding. Now he has mega millions from acting and from real estate, and is big buddies with Milton Friedman. And now there is talk of politics...This will be a case of "power or nothing"...Things are that simple in his movies and perhaps that is the reason why he is so popular in an America that is military hardware-worshipping, illiterate and demoralised. (Penman Sunday Correspondent July 1, 1990).

Admiration quickly shifts into unease, which shifts into speculations on the appeal of Schwarzenegger to the masses of America. In particular Schwarzenegger's foreignness, his immigrant status, carries for Penman disturbing associations of a Nazi past, a Europe from which so many fled, escaping to America.

In an associated fashion Schwarzenegger's very look reminds us of the appeal that Nazi art made to an idealised classical culture. Even in the case of these briefly sketched instances, we can see that the same elements can be inflected in very different ways, so that the meaning of elements like bodybuilding or 'foreignness', as they operate within Schwarzenegger's image, cannot ultimately be

secured. The double advertising images used to promote Kindergarten Cop (Ivan Reitman, 1990) successfully exploited the good/healthy versus bad/dangerous aspects of Schwarzenegger's star image. In the first he is cast as the tough cop, wearing shades, stubble and brandishing a shotgun, with a tagline that tells us he's 'the toughest undercover cop in LA'. In the second, dressed in casual clothes, he is mobbed by small children with the accompanying slogan 'Go ahead - you try telling him you didn't do your homework'. The comedy of the film comes from the very redundancy of Schwarzenegger's muscles when dealing with a class of small children. Violence figures in the film as a way of dealing with child-abusing fathers. For organising the children, Schwarzenegger must find the next best thing and teaches the children some marching, physical discipline.

Given his fame as a body-builder it is not surprising that Schwarzenegger's image has almost exclusively been defined through the body. In the mythological Conan films Schwarzenegger brought to life a comic-book version of muscular male heroism. He also appeared as a bodybuilder in Bob Rafelson's Stay Hungry (Bob Rafelson, 1976). Schwarzenegger's character, Joe Santo, is a contender for Mr Universe, a contest being staged in the American south in which the film is set. The 'simplicity' and 'gentleness' of his European immigrant persona, combined

with his huge frame, is played off against the corruption of wealthy southern society. He is seen playing the violin with his friends in a folksy scene in the woods. Later, when commissioned to play for a society party, he is patronised by the wealthy. Such films used, in a variety of ways, the fact of Schwarzenegger's body, a body which had made him famous before his career in the cinema. As with the advertising images for Kindergarten Cop, the fact of his size, and the toughness this is taken to imply, remains a fundamental aspect of Schwarzenegger's image.

Towards the end of the 1980s Schwarzenegger attempted to re-define and extend his range, largely through the use of humour. The Terminator had already featured a certain black humour, derived in part from the relentlessness of the cyborg figure that Schwarzenegger plays. Increasingly his films featured grim one-liners - referred to by distrustful critics as 'so-called humour'. From the self-aware black comedy of Commando, Schwarzenegger moved into the explicit comedy of Twins (Ivan Reitman, 1988) and Kindergarten Cop. Early on in Twins we see Schwarzenegger wandering the streets of LA with wide-eyed awe. He confronts a pumped-up advertising image of Stallone in Rambo III, jokingly comparing the size of the image to his own biceps. The fact of the body is central to such visual gags. The advertising slogan for Twins which accompanied

an image of Schwarzenegger and Danny de Vito, was 'Only their mother could tell them apart', again punning on size.

At the same time Schwarzenegger has continued to play action roles in films such as The Running Man (Paul Michael Glaser, 1987), Predator and Total Recall. In both The Running Man and Total Recall he plays a kind of extraordinary-everyman figure, combatting tyranny in future-world situations. Schwarzenegger's enactment of the Terminator in the 1991 sequel, Terminator 2, was similarly remodelled as a heroic figure. He is sent back in time to protect John Connor from a superior model of Terminator, the T1000. His role is significantly modified, not only through the use of a parodic self-referentiality in the sequel, but through the gradual 'humanising' of his character. This process involves the establishment of an affectionate relationship between the Terminator and the young John Connor. Seen through Sarah Connor's eyes, the Terminator is the ideal father. Indeed for Susan Jeffords the film is symptomatic of a shift to a strong yet fatherly image of masculine identity in the American cinema of the early 1990s. (12)

Terminator 2 makes fascinating use of the strength of Schwarzenegger's body, his size which seems to provoke the need for a reassuring humour in other films. Schwarzenegger becomes a protective figure, with his

solidity played off against the T1000 against which he is pitted. This up-dated machine is made of a metal alloy which allows it to change shape at will, acquiring a terrifying fluidity. The up-dated Terminator is typified by a lack of the bodily definition that is so important to the image of the bodybuilder. That the T1000 is a feminised monster is evident in this fluidity and is possibly echoed in director James Cameron's comments that he chose actor Robert Patrick for the part for his catlike qualities. Within the film Schwarzenegger's muscular solidity is played off against both the unstable qualities of the T1000 and the rather iconographically unstable figure of a muscular Linda Hamilton as Sarah Connor. (13)

Sylvester Stallone: The Body and the Voice

Sylvester Stallone achieved international fame in 1976 as the writer and star of Rocky, which took the Academy Award for best picture. Rocky is the story of a down at heel boxer, Rocky Balboa/Stallone who is given, as a PR exercise, the chance to fight the champ Apollo Creed/Carl Weathers. His ambition is to 'go the distance', to prove his existence on a public stage. The sentimental story of Rocky's move from low-life to achiever is told through the progression of his relationship with his girlfriend Adrian/Talia Shire and her brother Pauly/Burt Young, along with his trainer and other acquaintances. The film culminates in a vicious bout between Rocky and Creed.

Rocky survives the contest and is reunited with Adrian, with the film ending in a freeze-frame, close-up, image of the two together. The couple have made their way through five Rocky films, with the most recent, and purportedly the last, released in 1990.

Popularly, the story of Rocky has been read as Stallone's story, a reading that has been actively encouraged by the star's publicity machine. The themes of rags to riches, achievement through struggle within a white immigrant community, determination to succeed against all odds and the figure of the underdog, elements at the heart of Rocky, became central aspects of Stallone's star image. Adverts for First Blood, the first film in the Rambo series, picked up on Stallone's image as a fighter with the slogan 'this time he's fighting for his life'. Commenting on the direction of his career after Rambo III, Stallone has suggested that 'I came into this business as an underdog and that's what works best. My going too far into Supermanism (sic) has become a turnoff' (Empire June 1990: 38). Specifically here Stallone is commenting on the pumped up excesses of the body seen in Rambo III, a film which didn't have the box-office success in the US of the previous two, despite the fact that it was a huge success on the international market.

The success of Stallone's 'Rambo' persona served to consolidate the dumb, beefcake aspects of his image. The box-office appeal of the Rocky and Rambo series' have cemented the popular identification between Stallone and these two characters, whilst departures such as Rhinestone (Bob Clarke, 1984), a musical in which he starred with Dolly Parton, or F.I.S.T. (Norman Jewison, 1978), in which he played a union leader, not only failed to match their commercial success, but also failed to shift that identification. Two later attempts at comedy, Oscar (John Landis, 1991) and Stop Or My Mom Will Shoot! (Roger Spottiswoode, 1992) also failed at the box-office. The popular construction of Stallone's star image in a variety of media has followed the identification of his image with Rocky and Rambo, an identification which is in line with the excessive, more disturbing connotations of the muscular male hero, in contrast to the supposed 'heroic health' associated with Schwarzenegger. Stallone's films, and by extension the action cinema which came to be referred to as 'Rambo-style' films, have been dismissed by critics who point to the violence and the repetition of roles, joking about endless sequels and rejecting what were seen as typically one-dimensional performances.

If Schwarzenegger has used comedy in this films to extend his appeal, humour has also been a significant element in Stallone's attempt to turn his image around. The visual

jokes in Rhinestone centred around Stallone's height and his physical incompetence alongside the figure of hard-hitting Dolly Parton. After such box-office disasters Stallone made a concerted effort to turn his persona around at the end of the 1980s with the release of Tango and Cash and Lock Up. Whilst these are both action films, they attempt to reformulate Stallone's image. Tango and Cash uses verbal and visual comedy to achieve its effects. In a moment that is often referred to, from the early part of the film, Stallone's character asserts that 'Rambo is a pussy'. Such jibes at a character with whom Stallone was so closely identified were widely reported at the time as part of a bid for respectability, an attempt to shed the negative qualities associated with his role as Rambo. Indeed Stallone's attempt to change his image was rapidly incorporated into that image itself, providing a focus for interviews and features.

After a very public divorce from actress Brigitte Nielsen, Stallone's publicity machine launched an attempt to redefine his public persona. In an interview, given at the time, the star accepted the criticism directed at his action films, adding that

I always had it in the back of my mind that there would be a period when I felt I'd done my commercial tour of duty, and I could do something experimental. I just didn't think it would take so long.

The interview goes on with Stallone asserting that he had

tried 'to break out of the Rocky mould' with 'Paradise Alley and F.I.S.T., which were not action pictures' (20/20 April 1990). Reproduced from American Film the whole interview and accompanying feature centres on the need for Stallone to change his image. Stallone appears to accept the rebuke of pandering to commerce, invoking the rigours of the traditional star system which is expressed through a military metaphor, a 'commercial tour of duty' which, once over, is to be followed by a period of experiment.

The opposition between art and commerce that is drawn on here is a familiar one, often deployed in cultural criticism. This opposition is further mapped onto an opposition between the mind and the body. Such a set of associations are recognisable from longstanding traditions of which oppose art and the mind to commerce (the popular) and the body. Thus the Sunday Mirror magazine announces that 'the new Stallone wants to be taken seriously', that 'at 43 he wants to be accepted for his brain as well as [his] brawn'. This short photo-feature offers a new image of the star in which, while 'the biceps may still be as firm...the light brown eyes are now framed by glasses'. Stallone took to wearing glasses in public, if not in pin-ups. He spoke in interviews of his art collection and his desire to make films about figures such as Poe and Puccini. Such pleas for cultural respectability evoked this suspicious response from the Guardian

So widespread is the continuing retreat from rampant masculinity that even a Neanderthal like Sylvester Stallone can't stop flashing his New Man credentials; enter the new caring, sharing, sensitive Sly, wearing spectacles and much more concerned with showing off his Picassos than his pecs. (14)

The objection, voiced by several reviewers, to the turnaround at work in Stallone's image involves a suspicion precisely of the ways in which different masculine identities are produced through surface changes, the replacement of one image with another which only serves to emphasise the artificiality that is operating here. An element of this suspicion may also be to do with the possibility of appropriating high culture in this way. If it can be adopted as an accessory, a matter of style, then to what extent are the values associated with high culture themselves rendered 'superficial'?

The opposition of specs and pecs, sensitivity and the Neanderthal, situates Stallone's attempts to turn his image around firmly within recent shifts in images of masculinity. This process involves an attempt to reorganise the respective significance given to the body and the voice. The muscular male body, foregrounded in the star image's of a range of 'physical actors', such as Stallone, Schwarzenegger and Dolph Lundgren, is played off against the voice. The verbal dimension is often played down in a cinematic tradition which is so centrally to do with the spectacle of the body. Introducing the interview

cited above, the author expresses surprise as to what a talkative 'guy' Stallone is: 'This is Rambo? Talking so fast? Stallone, so closely identified with Rocky and Rambo that people assume he's stupid and wooden-tongued, was clowning around in a Warner's post-production room'. The commentary continues

Although you think of Stallone as a heavyweight, up close he appeared more of a middleweight, with quick moves and a light, almost spritely grace. He spoke quickly, too, almost in a stream-of-consciousness style. His voice was a little higher pitched than usually heard in his movies, but often for effect he went deep into the Rocky tone. Wearing glasses and his standard outfit of dress shirt and slacks, he was well-tailored, well-barbered and very smooth of face.

Stallone's tired of being considered dumb, and Tango and Cash is supposed to help remedy that. His character is a cop, but an erudite, glib cop. Stallone sees the movie...as his first step away from hard-core action pictures.

Presented as an attempt to reveal the 'real' Stallone, the interviewer addresses us with a bemused tone, deflecting attention away from the body ('more of a middleweight') to the more 'civilised' qualities associated with fashion and the voice. Stallone's voice is described as higher pitched, his body less imposing than the macho image would suggest. The 'civilised' signifiers of glasses and fashion are invoked, set against the display of the unclothed male body within the action film. This play is taken up in Tango and Cash in the jokes made about Tango missing his wardrobe.

Reviewers have on the whole refused the attempt at a shift in Stallone's image, retaining the emphasis on the body, rather than the voice. A feature in the Guardian, for example, commented of Rambo that 'Stallone...substitutes oafish muttering for dialogue, making that other hero of the genre, Clint Eastwood, seem almost garrulous'. (15) Eastwood has become over the last twenty years, respected enough as an actor and filmmaker for some, though by no means all, to see his minimal style as craft. Eastwood's performance can thus be seen as the artful withholding of words, rather than an artless inability to speak. Chris Holmlund comments thus on the restyled Stallone:

We want to see the body. In Stallone's case muscles are costume enough. In clothes, and especially in business suits, he looks overdressed. His attempts at being 'classy' only demonstrate how much masculine masquerades are shaped by class expectations' (in Cohan and Hark eds 1993: 222).

Holmlund's comments here emphasise the extent to which these moves contradicted a star image defined by a class identity articulated through the body.

Inflections of speech and silence are central to the play of different definitions of masculinity and maleness in the action cinema. The hysterical rambling of a character like Leo/Joe Pesci, a witness in need of protection in Lethal Weapon 2 mark him out as weak and unthreatening. This also highlights the rather different hysteria to which Mel Gibson's character is subject in the film - the whole

premise of his character is his supposed 'death wish' which allows him to perform as a cop since he is not afraid of potentially deadly situations. The term 'Rambo' is often used to denote stupid behaviour, an irrationality which is closely linked to the inarticulacy of the action hero, of the stress on the body and cinema as spectacle, rather than the voice. (16) In contrast to the more physical stars, who have emerged from body culture, Eastwood's is, to an extent, an invisible body. Generally fully clothed, the power of his character is signified through characteristics such as firepower and marksmanship. The fast draw, for example, is a key icon of the three 'Dollar' films, as well as being at times played for laughs. With the advent of the 'physical actor' the male body is made startlingly visible. The action hero as returning war hero, for example, actually carries the war within himself. Conflict is literally inscribed in the hysterical (overdetermined/overdeveloped) male body.

The Wise-Guy Persona in the Action Cinema

Enlisting Jimmy Dix/Damon Wayans as his partner at the end of The Last Boy Scout, Joe Hallenbeck/Bruce Willis jokes that, this being the nineties, a hero can't just take out bad guys. He has also to give them a one-liner. Like 'I'll Be Back' asks Dix, with reference to Schwarzenegger's trademark line. At points, this spectacular film seems an exercise in wordplay, with the heroes and the villains

trading complex insults, challenges and comebacks as well as commenting on each other's verbal performance. I have already spoken in chapter three of the uses made of Bruce Willis's star image in Die Hard. Willis's wise-cracking persona was initially derived from his role in the hit TV series Moonlighting. This comedy/drama/detective series centred on the Blue Moon detective agency. The action was concerned as much with verbal confrontations between Willis and Cybill Shepherd in a variety of guises, as with the work of detection.

Whilst Die Hard gives the audience Willis as action hero pin-up, his persona is very much defined through the voice. He is, in this, much more wise-guy than tough-guy. The Last Boy Scout brings the two together in violent scenes involving grim comedy. Words are very clearly deployed in the film as part of a battle, a struggle for power, behind which lurks the threat of physical violence. This verbal sparring, the challenge posed by the uses of words, echoes the complexity of the uses of language within black American culture, as well as traditions of stand-up comedy, with which Wayons is associated, and which Whoopi Goldberg also draws on in her role as a narcotics detective in Fatal Beauty. (17)

In mellower mode, Willis scored a huge success as the voice of baby Mikey in Look Who's Talking (1989, Amy Heckerling).

(Damon Wayons' voice was also used, along with those of Willis and Roseanne Barr, in the sequel.) Indeed the particular style of masculine identity that Willis enacts as John McClane in the two Die Hard films has something childlike about it, a trait shared with his role in Moonlighting. A perpetual adolescent, even if a knowing one, there is a sense in which he seems to be playing games (cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians). Die Hard has Willis/McClane cracking jokes to himself, wearing a facial expression which seems to convey his sense of surprise and confusion that he is at the centre of the explosive narrative events. McClane styles himself as the dandy cowboy Roy Rogers, keeping up a running commentary at the same time. If The Last Boy Scout represents one of the grimmest versions yet seen of the Willis wise-guy character, the comic aspects of his persona are played out more fully in the more fantastic Hudson Hawk, in which he sings old show tunes as a way of timing robberies with his partner Tommy.

If there is something childlike about the Willis persona, a good deal of The Last Boy Scout centres on his nightmare relationship with an unfaithful wife and foul-mouthed daughter, a focus which emphasises the difficulties of the role of father though these are ultimately 'resolved' in the film's final scene. Whilst there is an unquestioning, idealised relationship between father and daughter in

Schwarzenegger's Commando, Hallenbeck's daughter in the Last Boy Scout is hostile and abusive in the extreme. Dix also functions in some senses in the role of a 'son' to Hallenbeck within the film, referred to as a kid, so that their relationship, which is based on verbal battles, functions as a testing ground for the ultimate family reunion with which the film concludes. The complexities of the figure of the 'father' in recent action films, including The Last Boy Scout, are taken up in chapter six.

In the framework that emerges through an analysis of these different star images we can see how an emphasis on the verbal is put to work in Tango and Cash, a film that sets out to be humorous, using the backchat associated with the wise-guy to take swipes at Stallone's he-man image within a buddy format. The film can work with such a redefinition of Stallone's image, partly because of the surrounding publicity, but also because of the presence of Kurt Russell as Stallone's partner and the comic tone of the relationship between the two. Tango and Cash plays off two male types in its buddy pairing from the 'bad cop, worse cop' scenario which serves to tell us that, despite the glasses, Tango is no 'softy', to the boldly (or crudely, depending on your point of view) drawn contrast between the two men's styles. Russell plays a well-established role, the macho slob who is sent up in John Carpenter's Big Trouble in Little China (1986), worshipped in Backdraft

(Ron Howard, 1991). An extraordinary but 'regular' guy, Russell's persona retains a tough guy aura whilst exuding those qualities that pass for normality. The opening sequences of Tango and Cash are concerned to establish the differences between the two police heroes - their offices, guns, clothes, appearance, eating habits and social graces.

Ray Tango and Gabriel Cash are both media stars, officers who get very public results and who, whilst they have never met, maintain a rivalry over their respective press coverage. Cash dismisses Tango, whose picture is featured in the newspaper, as 'Armani with a badge', and Tango's Captain paraphrases the press coverage as 'Down Town Clown versus Beverly Hills Wop' which offers a crude summation of the character types deployed. As the film progresses Tango and Cash move from rivalry to friendship, partly drawn together by the plot to frame them, and partly through the character of Kiki/Teri Hatcher, Tango's sister. They survive the ordeal of prison together, escape together and proceed to unmask the conspiracy of drug dealers orchestrated by arch-villain Perrette/Jack Palance. From the separate press photos we see at the beginning of the film they progress to the final newspaper image, a take-off of Desperately Seeking Susan, with the two clasping raised hands.

Russell's presence allows for repartee between the two tough guys, swapping jokes in the shower and kidding around. Giving Stallone a chance to wise-crack and dress up, it is Russell who takes his shirt off within the first few minutes of the film. And it is also Kurt Russell who ends up in female drag, posing as the (rather butch) 'property' of Tango's sister in order to make a getaway from the club where she is a dancer. Playing upon the pleasures of dressing up and the acting out of different star images, Tango and Cash are offered as good to look at, 'two of the department's most highly decorated officers'. As in the Lethal Weapon films desire between cop partners is invoked and disavowed within the framework offered by comedy. Indeed comedy opens up a space for male and female drag, allowing a play with the boundaries of gendered identity, with jokes about the male image and sexuality which are not permissible within the more earnest dramas of the action tradition.

The strategies through which comedy, physical display and action were used in the films and star images of Stallone and Schwarzenegger in the 1980s have continued and developed in the 1990s. Stallone's role in Cliffhanger (Renny Harlin, 1993) represents the continuation of an earnest heroic type. The hero must defeat the villains and learn to confront his own fears. The spectacle of the body is showcased alongside the spectacular cinematography in a

mountain setting. Demolition Man returns to a parodic style. The references and in-jokes are too many to list - that Stallone/John Spartan finds he has slept through a Schwarzenegger presidency is indicative. Within the parodic style however, the centrality of a populist individualism to the Stallone persona is retained. Members of the future world society in which he finds himself (San Angeles 2032) variously describe Spartan/Stallone as 'neanderthal', a 'cave man', 'primitive', 'savage' and so on. Ultimately however he is able to effect a reconciliation between the highly regulated San Angeles society and the outcasts who live in its sewers. (18)

The film within a film of Last Action Hero finds Schwarzenegger/Jack Slater praising Stallone's performance in Terminator 2 to the confusion of a young fan. As discussed in chapter three, it was widely suggested at the time that the relative failure of Last Action Hero could be attributed to an over-complex structure which develops as an elaborate debunking not only of Schwarzenegger's own star image but of the very idea of the action hero. Schwarzenegger achieved more success with the following summer's True Lies (James Cameron, 1994) which although comic in a James Bond tradition, retains the figure of the hero intact. Indeed the film's spectacular stunts could be read in terms of superheroism. The failure of Last Action Hero perhaps indicates the extent to which the

action cinema can pursue a parodic deconstruction of its own conventions. (19)

Conclusion

The use of comedy represents one way of undermining the more disturbing aspects of the muscular action hero, though as in the case of The Last Boy Scout, this is not necessarily a substitute for the centrality of violence and explosive spectacle. Nonetheless, a key distinction emerges in the action films of recent years, between a silent (seemingly inarticulate) and an extremely verbal representation of the action hero. A dichotomy can be seen to develop in which the anxieties provoked by the physical display of the white male hero are displaced either through the use of comedy, as in many of Schwarzenegger's films, or through the deployment of images of torture and suffering, a strategy pushed to the extreme in Stallone's earnest prison drama, Lock Up. This last film is discussed further in chapter six, as are the other strategies, referred to here, through which masculinities and sexualities are represented in the action cinema. In the chapter that follows the relationship between a populist discourse, and gendered images of national identities are explored.

CHAPTER FIVE: MASCULINITY, POLITICS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Introduction:

This chapter explores the articulation of masculine identities in the action cinema in relation to politics and national identity. The significance of these issues is partly a product of the evident concern expressed in both academic and journalistic accounts of the American cinema during the 1980s. The perception that a new, nationalistic masculine identity was being offered to the young in films such as Rambo is discussed here in some detail. With reference to film examples, it is argued that such action films offer a complex articulation of gendered and national identities.

The 'Age of Rambo'

'Physical acting', the cinematic performance of the muscular male body that has been associated most directly with such stars as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, achieved a new visibility during the 1980s. Stallone and Schwarzenegger vied for the position of top box-office male star, presiding over what can be seen as a renaissance of the action cinema. The revival of the action/adventure film also generated suspicions which centred on the politics of 'heroic' narratives from the Indiana Jones cycle to Rambo itself. Film critics, such as

Andrew Britton or Robin Wood, expressed an unease to do with the ways in which such films were both recognisable and yet distinctive, harking back to the cinematic past whilst articulating worrying 'new' images of masculine identity. In this context, questions over the political status of the image - whether, for example, the figure of the hero was intended as parody or endorsement of a tough masculinity - became crucial. The qualities of a self-reflexive knowingness, so apparent in many 1980s films, could be construed as a form of auto-deconstruction, or as one more ideological disguise, a comedy that pre-empts criticism. These questions acquired a new urgency at a time, the mid-1980s, when some forms of postmodernist discourse seemed precisely to refuse any political fixing of meaning. Yet, if political fixity is a characteristic of propaganda, it is rarely to be found in the popular cinema, particularly a popular cinema that seeks, and finds, success in international markets.

During the 1980s one film in particular, Rambo: First Blood Part II, became the over-determined reference point for a whole range of concerned media discourses, generated from both the left and right. A small-scale moral panic was orchestrated around the film in Britain, leading to a BBC ban and a whole host of journalistic and academic speculations on 'Rambo-style' films, 'Ramboidal violence' and the characterisation of the mid-1980s as the 'Age of

Rambo'. (1) An examination of the reputation of the film offers a way to open up the relationship between masculinity, politics and the action film. Rambo was a film whose reputation preceeded it and, to an extent, engulfed the film text itself. The film, a big-budget sequel to Stallone's 1982 hit First Blood, was notorious well before it reached Britain in 1985. In the context of the Beirut hijacking, within which the film got its American release, President Reagan was reported as saying 'After seeing "Rambo" last night I know what to do next time it happens'. (2) These comments provided the most public framing device through which Rambo was read as Reaganite, as endorsing a hawkish foreign policy, a muscular lack of diplomacy. A visual link was made in a much-reproduced poster image of the time which featured Reagan's head superimposed onto Rambo's torso and dubbed 'Ronbo'. Reagan had already been widely linked to a revisionist reevaluation of America's role in Vietnam.

In Britain, the film was released into the aftermath of a particularly punitive campaign against 'video violence' which had led to the banning of many titles, along with increased censorship and the passing of the 1984 Video Recordings Act which legislated for the certification of all films released for video. Directed specifically at the horror film, commentators at the time conjured up a series of images of evil films invading British culture from

foreign lands. (3) It is worthwhile sketching this particular national context, for while Rambo was successful worldwide, the film's appeal has most often been contextualised within a specific understanding of American political history. The pumped-up figure of Rambo seemed to offer more than a metaphor, functioning for various cultural commentators as the literal embodiment of American interventionism. Critics spoke, for example, of 'the presidentially approved fantasy of Rambo regeneration' (Walsh and Louvre (eds) 1988: 6). Since the mid-1980s the term 'Rambo' has become common currency, earning an entry in the updated Oxford English Dictionary. (4) 'Rambo' operated to condense a range of discourses concerning sexuality and politics.

In investigating the cultural significance and critical reputation of 'Rambo' this chapter also seeks to explore these discourses. I do not want to argue that an ideological analysis has no purchase here, since the action film offers us, amongst other things, complex ideological configurations of nationhood and masculinity. Yet the particular terms in which action cinema was condemned in the 1980s proves to be as interesting a site of inquiry as the films themselves, partly due to the extreme loathing that they have managed to provoke, but also because an examination of the terms in which that loathing has been

expressed allows an address to questions of masculinity and cinematic representation. (5)

The production of a phrase like the 'Age of Rambo' to describe the 1980s can be read as one version of the frequently renewed suspicion that society is in moral decline, a decline that is measured against a mythicised past. Within a variety of journalistic and academic discourses, an operation of condensation allowed a series of critical and cultural worries to be represented, embodied perhaps, in the figure of 'Rambo'. Two aspects of the 'Rambo' persona and films have been singled out for particular critical attention. The most evident is an association drawn by some between the muscular cinema of the 1980s and the Reaganite New Right in the United States. Here Rambo is seen to cinematically correct the national humiliation of a defeat in Vietnam. As expressed in the Guardian:

SYLVESTER STALLONE'S Rambo II has become more than just a movie. It opened in American cinemas at the right time to profit from the Beirut hijacking. When the White House was impotent with rage, patriotic Americans could watch the muscle of Rambo destroy the Vietnamese and Russian armies as he rescued GIs from Communist prisons; he won in the cinema the war the United States lost on the ground.

The view that the film 'released the frustration of a nation' is standard. Rambo has repeatedly acted as the low quality reference point against which to define other 'Vietnam' films such as Oliver Stone's Born On the Fourth

of July (1989). (6) Rambo defines the quality of other Vietnam films broadly along the lines of an opposition between realism and comic-book fantasy. Such comparisons emerge from a tradition in which many American narratives dealing with the war have been treated with scepticism. (7)

Whilst America's involvement in Vietnam defines Rambo, with its invocation of the rejected veteran, the film itself is not set during the conflict. The only scenes to directly invoke that period in the whole cycle are the flashbacks of torture in First Blood. In this the film is positioned to one side of the 1980s wave of Hollywood films centred on Vietnam. More generally, Rambo is one of the few examples of 'muscular cinema' to actually tell us the country in which the fiction takes place, or to offer anything more than the most basic historical reference points. (8) It is far more usual, if the American action narrative is not set within the USA itself, to evoke an unspecified foreign location. It is also noteworthy that whilst a film like Commando lists a range of global hotspots in which John Matrix/Schwarzenegger has been involved, reference to Vietnam is studiously avoided. The action takes place instead in a vague terrain. Similarly, whilst we might remark of the jungle setting of Predator that this is 'Vietnam', this is only to assert that it is reminiscent of the conventions of the Vietnam film. There is a defining sense of placelessness informing both the action cinema and

its articulation of the heroic figure. This is partly a function of the need to sell to international markets, but also serves the mythic (that is, generalised) status to which the narratives aspire.

The second set of critical concerns which inform the perception of 'Rambo' is already implicit in the Guardian's assessment, with its references to muscular power (Rambo) versus impotence (the White House). Power and potency are constitutive discourses of masculinity. The figure of Rambo has often been taken to represent the (re)emergence of a threateningly physical understanding of masculinity. Rambo is, within this view, read as symptomatic of a 1980s backlash against feminism, functioning as 'a sexist assertion of male dominance' (Walsh and Louvre (eds) 1988: 56). Jonathan Rutherford suggests the existence of 'two idealised images' structuring our understanding of masculinity in the 1980s. These images, termed 'New Man and Retributive Man' he takes as corresponding 'to the repressed and the public meanings of masculinity' (Chapman and Rutherford (eds) 1988: 28). For Rutherford, images of the 'New Man' attempt, partly in a response to feminism, to articulate men's repressed emotions, revealing a 'more feminised image' (ibid 32). Against this, the public face of Retributive Man 'represents the struggle to reassert a traditional masculinity, a tough authority'.

For Rutherford the 'classic figure is Rambo'. He evokes a world in which 'the image of Stallone with his huge machine gun adorns the t-shirts, books and toys of tens of thousands of little boys' (ibid 28). This ubiquitous figure:

advertises a destructive machismo as the solution to men's problems. He is John Wayne with his gloves off, wildly lashing out at everything that threatens and disappoints him. He confronts a world gone soft, pacified by traitors and cowards, dishonourable feminised men. It is a world that has disrupted his notions of manhood and honour. It threatens his comprehension of who he is. And his attempts to recreate order, and subdue the forces that threaten him, degenerate into a series of violent actions (ibid 28-9).

The invocation of threatened children is significant here, according with a more general argument that the western world has, as Jeffrey Walsh puts it, 'inflicted psychic damage on its young people through the popularization of militarist culture'. (9) Children and the family are often invoked as a displaced way of speaking about more general societal fears, to do with the supposed excesses of popular culture, as well as the feared behaviour of those groups constructed as marginal. (10)

In Rutherford's schema, violence 'represents a retreat into physical force whose fantasy is played out in toy shops across the country'. His sharply drawn contrast between the articulate and caring new man on the one hand, and an image of Ramboidal frenzy on the other is quite familiar. A regressive retreat into fantasy, it is suggested, is not

only cowardly, but childish (conducted in toy shops), indeed it is implicitly unmanly. A rhetorical strategy is in operation here which seeks to polemically redefine the terms through which an understanding of 'good' and 'bad' masculinities are constructed, with the exercise of physical power devalued as unmanly. Yet this strategy not only leaves unquestioned those articulate, institutional forms of power, but can be seen to represent the embrace of a patriarchal rhetoric which constructs so many other groups as childish, needing both punishment and protection. Further, these comments echo an already existing discourse which has framed the difficulty of the task facing men, which is that of working through 'their' masculinity. This task is expressed in terms of an opposition between a verbal man (often cast as feminised) and a physical man. Whilst such a dichotomy is not a feature of all writings on masculinity, it is evident in certain discourses, finding its most popular expression in the notion that men need to 'express' the 'feminine side' of themselves. Such a conception tends to preserve, rather than question, two polarised embodiments of masculinity.

These polarised figures, who appear at the same historical moment, need to be seen as interacting with and informing each other. Otherwise, the effect is to critically reproduce a stable binary relation between femininity and masculinity, an either/or that is mapped onto different

male types. The action hero is defined through this opposition between verbal and physical abilities and the definitions of masculinity they propose. By contrast, a model that stresses the plurality of masculine identities allows particular cinematic images of the male hero to be situated within a wider cultural context, in which they are seen to play off and work with each other rather than existing in secure opposition.

The representation of gender and sexuality in the action cinema involves a complex articulation of factors such as class and race. Masculinity is written in diverse ways over the male and female body, the black and the white body, in the action genre. Susan Jeffords' book, The Re-Masculinization of America, addresses the ways in which the representation of Vietnam, both at the time of America's involvement and since, is concerned to reinscribe gendered relations of power. She effectively demonstrates the working of gendered discourses within a diverse range of texts, but goes further than this in an assertion that the writing of gender overrides all other differences, so that

The defining feature of American war narratives is that they are a "man's story" from which women are generally excluded. For such narratives, gender is the assumed category of interpretation, the only one that is not subject to interpretation and variation of point of view, experience, age, race and so on (Jeffords 1991: 49).

Jeffords asserts here that gender operates within Vietnam representation as a unifying category which effaces all

other differences. This perspective allows a fascinating insight on the oedipal adventures of the white American heroes of 1980s films, such as Platoon and Full Metal Jacket (Stanley Kubrick, 1987), heroes who, in their shifting attitudes towards the war and their comrades in arms, come to represent 'America'. Such a representation is quite explicit in Platoon's rites of passage narrative, which features the retrospective voiceover of the hero Chris, who comments on his own war experiences as a metaphor for the nation's turmoil. Whilst such films may well assume an audience who can identify with the male quest narrative that is offered, different audiences may well have other concerns and investments in Vietnam representation. The story told in Platoon is very clearly that of a middle-class white man, whose difference from the 'grunts' and black Americans with whom he 'finds himself' in Vietnam, cannot be effaced by the strategies of the film text alone. (11)

If 'Rambo' operates to condense a range of discourses it also stands in for a range of films, those starring bodybuilders or featuring violent action sequences. There is a generalised way in which the term is used, associated as it is with ideological reference points as diverse as Ronald Reagan and child-abuse, American cultural imperialism and a regressive masculinity. In contrast to the way in which the term cuts across such a range of

discourses, reference to 'Rambo' is usually characterised by an assumption of the very obviousness of what is meant. To give an example. Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake illustrate their discussion of Eco's idea of the shot as utterance with the example of a 'shot of Sylvester Stallone naked to the waist firing a rocket launcher' which 'does not signify "Rambo" but rather "there is Rambo", or more probably "here is Rambo single-handedly defeating the Evil Empire"' (Lapsley and Westlake 1988: 44). The 'Evil Empire', a term drawn from the film series Star Wars, also refers specifically to President Reagan's characterisation of the Soviet Union in one of his speeches. With this reference, and with the foregrounding of action, 'Rambo' seems obvious enough to be used as an illustration. Of course the meaning of 'Rambo' is in some senses clear, precisely because it has been used so often to signify a thuggishly violent nationalistic macho. That is to say, the term has acquired a cultural meaning through its repeated use in a variety of journalistic and political as well as cinematic contexts. It is not possible to look at the film or think about the term without reference to the complex history of signification in which it has been involved. (12) The narrative has thus become inseparable from all the other narratives in which Rambo came to play a part through the 1980s, such as Reagan's public gaffes or fears about video and computer games and their effects on children.

Semper Fi? Masculinity and Nationhood

A discursive link between nationhood and masculinity provides an important context for considering the action cinema. Nationhood and masculinity are crucial terms within most war films, indeed combat films generally. Yet cinematic discourses of American manhood are profoundly ambiguous, certainly in the three Rambo films, and in many others designated as the texts of macho revisionism or, in its crudest version, as 'dumb movies for dumb people'. (13)

Rambo and, by extension, other muscular movies have been criticised for their rewriting of history, for the distortion of the history of America's involvement in Vietnam. Such critical concerns represent, in part, an important desire to see historical justice done. But in terms of an exploration of the films addressed here, such criticisms do need to be contextualised and worked through. An ambiguous articulation of America and belonging is at work in the Rambo series. Such ambiguities operate across many other action films. In the Rambo series we see the articulation of a masculinity which is out of place, with the films' narratives fuelled by problems of location. The films discussed here can be seen to repeatedly pose a question: is there a place for the muscular hero in America? Just as often, we find that neither America's urban or rural society has a place for the hero. (14)

Increasingly then the powerful white hero is a figure who operates in the margins, whilst in many senses continuing

to represent dominance. This trait is important to many action films and is also a key source of pleasure in the genre.

In the three Rambo films problems of location can be read via the symbolic space of Vietnam and its relationship to America. This imaginary geography mobilises two key terms: home and hell. In First Blood home, specifically smalltown America, is defined as hellish. Rambo is arrested for vagrancy, tortured and hunted, first by the local sheriff's department and then by the National Guard. The film ends with Rambo's much-ridiculed monologue of rage against an America in which he has no place. Collapsing in tears into the arms of his military mentor, Colonel Trautman, Rambo is finally led off into captivity. Rambo: First Blood Part II opens with Rambo breaking rocks in jail. On the promise of a pardon, he returns to Vietnam with a secret mission to search for American POWs. An advertising slogan for the film told us that 'What you call hell, he calls home' (i.e. Vietnam). This construction of Vietnam as home, which is equated with a space where the hero can perform, is accompanied by the paradoxical narrative struggle to bring the MIA/POWs home (back to America), to a place that is precisely defined as unwelcoming, which is far from homely.

Commenting on the populist themes of the Vietnam film, it is with some surprise that Leslie Fiedler notes that 'even

in Rambo II' the hero's 'righteous wrath is directed at an American enemy' (Fiedler 1990: 398). In the final moments of the film Rambo, refusing an offer to return to the States and re-enlist, walks off into the sunset to live 'day by day'. This is a telling generic moment, invoking the self-reliant hero associated with the western.

Rambo's ending was greeted with suspicion by critics who objected to the speech in which Rambo, on behalf of the POWs, speaks of a desire for 'our country to love us as much as we love it'. The patriotic strength of the plea is articulated alongside a narrative rejection of America. Rambo makes his speech in response to Trautman's mistaken rebuke that, whilst the Vietnam war may have been wrong, he should not 'hate his country'. Rambo replies that he would 'die for it', before leaving the scene. He is discovered at the beginning of Rambo III living in a buddhist monastery in Thailand where, according to the film's publicity, 'he has gone to find the inner peace that has always eluded him'. The opening sequence of the film replays a scene from Cimino's The Deer Hunter (1978) with stick fighting taking the place of Russian roulette. Trautman, the sole figure in military uniform amongst a crowd of gamblers, watches Rambo fight but loses him in the chaos that follows. Here Rambo's immersion in the culture of the Orient is seen as positive, regenerating

rather than self-destructive as it appears in Cimino's film.

Of course the history of western representations and uses of a mythicised 'Orient' is complex and too large a topic to be discussed in any great detail here. Rambo III invokes the 'Orient' as a space for white men and women to discover themselves (self-discovery is a common theme of the Vietnam narrative), along with a set of counter-cultural resonances which have often been used precisely to define the otherness of the Vietnam veteran within Hollywood cinema. (15) Tom Laughlin's Billy Jack (1971) is an early example of the latter, a film which casts the veteran as not only a hippy with an affinity for the American Indian, but as skilled in the martial arts. The all-American nationalism so much discussed in relation to the Rambo films - Rambo as a 'pin up for the president' - is also strangely oppositional, articulating a love of nation which is based on a complex relationship to America. (16)

In thinking about these questions, Jeffords' analysis of gender and Vietnam representation can be positioned alongside the more general concerns of the action film. Rather than the specificity of the war film, the action film offers the audience a complex identification with a hero who asserts his right to belong to a nation which

rejects him. Hence the importance of a non-WASP, white ethnicity in, for example, American gangster narratives. In the Rocky films, this emphasis on ethnicity is maintained against the construction of black Americans and an aryan Russian opponent. In the opening moments of Rambo, the muscular figure of Stallone/Rambo is imaged as imprisoned, shot from above framed by barbed wire, and seen in close-up through a wire fence. Rejection is a crucial term for a narrative which is based around the figure of those 'left behind', the POWs. The sequence in which Rambo is abandoned by the American military, with the rescue helicopter just out of reach, echoes a visual repertoire established through various Vietnam films. Such images express the powerlessness of the 'ordinary soldier' of which these narratives speak, whilst at the same time they offer, in the figure of the muscular hero, an extraordinary soldier.

At a more general level, the play with the line between acceptance and rejection defines cinematic stereotypes such as the heroic sergeant, the private eye and the rogue-cop, figures who are neither officers nor criminals. It is worth pointing out, in terms of the processes of identification at work here, that dispossessed groups do not necessarily reject the nation of which they are a part. In the poem 'I, Too, am America', Langston Hughes articulates the centrality of blackness to an American

identity. More than this, the poem asserts that once the culture realises its omission 'They'll see how beautiful I am/ And be ashamed'. Hughes asserts the right not only to be part of America, but to be part of a necessarily changed understanding of that nation. (17)

Cinematic articulations of masculinity and nationhood are problematised within American cultural traditions, particularly in terms of imaging Vietnam, around the politics of 'race'. Nationalism has provided a crucial rhetorical language in anti-colonial struggles. But colonialist discourse also operates within nations. Vietnam representation deploys racial discourses in complex ways, from the Vietnamese, who are largely (un)represented as invisible Orientals, to the black Americans who are symbolically central, if marginal to the narrative, in films such as Platoon and Hamburger Hill (John Irvin, 1987), and the white heroes who 'find themselves' within the colonial space of Vietnam. Made during the conflict itself, the didactic The Green Berets (John Wayne/Ray Kellogg, 1968) had been careful to feature black and Asian performers (such as Raymond St Jacques and George Takei) acting alongside John Wayne as spokesmen for American intervention. Whilst Vietnam was the first major conflict to follow the de-segregation of the American military, the disproportionate numbers of casualties amongst black soldiers has become a repeated point of protest (countered

by official denials) in an all too literal demonstration of the different values placed on black and white American bodies.

The war also reached its peak during a time of political upheaval in the States, with anti-war demonstrations and the civil rights movement. This confluence was accompanied by the public protest against the war by figures such as Muhammad Ali, who lost his title as heavyweight boxing champion for his refusal to fight in Vietnam. Mary Ellison, in her discussion of black music and the war, points to the clear anti-war views of prominent black American activists, as well as the voicing of such views in black popular culture. She also cites the anti-war sentiments expressed by black servicemen in Vietnam, ^{which} sentiments ~~were~~ expressed partly in terms of an affinity for the Vietnamese struggle against the US in terms of a shared colonial experience (Walsh and Aulick (eds) 1989). The grim irony of the historical moment saw the juxtaposition of the black struggle for equality in the States, with the rhetoric of democracy that supposedly legitimated the war in Vietnam.

Just as 'Vietnam' films are not generally concerned to address either the Vietnamese or the political issues surrounding the conflict, the contradictory experiences of black American servicemen rarely form an explicit part of

mainstream American fictions. In Platoon a stylised black American culture (Motown and marijuana) is juxtaposed with an equally stylised view of white redneck culture (country music and beer). The film sets up two extreme spaces which are associated with these groups, and the audience follows the white hero's dilemma: which imaginary identification will he make? Chris/Charlie Sheen is a volunteer in a drafted army, a literate middle-class figure positioned amongst the ranks of the dispossessed. As in Hamburger Hill, the stereotypical invisibility of the Vietnamese enemy allows a focus on the tensions within the male group. As Jeffords' analysis of the primacy of gender implies, racial difference is constructed within the world of Platoon as little more than a way to talk about the two different versions of (American) masculine identity that Chris is offered. Within the different terms of Rambo's fantasy narrative, we are offered the working through of a populist drama of the dispossessed. This is exaggerated, with something of a parodic edge, in Rambo III. Griggs, the voice of American officialdom, reels off the familiar litany that, should Rambo be caught, 'we'll deny any participation or even knowledge of your existence'. 'I'm used to it' replies Rambo, a phrase which refers to the other films in the sequence and the ever more impossible odds the character faces, but also to Stallone's star image as an 'underdog' within a white immigrant community.

Truth and Vietnam Discourse: 'telling it like it is'

Whilst the action cinema is informed by a sense of placelessness, Vietnam remains a named, if completely imaginary space. It operates as a reference point for shared experiences (for the male group) a training ground (for the individual hero) or simply acts as a generalised explanation for the hero's instability. The title of Jeffrey Walsh and Alf Louvre's collection of writings, Tell Me Lies About Vietnam, indicates the defining importance of a notion of truth in the discourses around America's Vietnam with which the book is concerned. In their introduction, Walsh and Louvre emphasise the importance of uncovering and retaining the details of historical evidence in opposition to the fictions of the 'blockbusting film'. They cite the example of Rambo, a film which they claim is seen in unspecified 'non English-speaking countries' with 'sub-titles that equate the Vietnamese with the Japanese, the Russians with the Nazis'. Such a transformation they take as an indication of how 'ideological war is waged', noting that even the film's 'slender historical referents' have 'been wholly replaced by myth, cliché and stereotype'. For Walsh and Louvre such an 'arrogant contempt for history is profoundly dangerous' (Walsh and Louvre (eds) 1988: 22-23). The equation between the Vietnamese and the Japanese spoken of here certainly wouldn't be at odds with the anti-Japanese flavour of many Hong Kong action films, and here

the importance of international markets for the popular cinema returns.

In a similar vein, Leslie Fiedler writes of his surprise on learning that 'during the recent revolution there, a reporter had found a band of Maoist guerillas in the Phillipines watching Rambo on their Betamax' (Fiedler 1990: 398). Such a phenomenon, the fluidity of historical referents within an internationalised culture, makes sense in terms of the fictions that popular films play and replay, the pleasures that the films offer. Though these pleasures do not necessarily accord with the project of compiling a detailed ethnography of the Vietnam war, they nonetheless bear a relationship to a process of cultural accounting, in which issues of power, oppression and the struggle against it, are worked out in stylised form. It is in this sense that Leslie Fiedler sees Rambo as mythic, having both a specific resonance in that it provides a narrative of American involvement in Vietnam, and operating in terms of a generalised right-wing populism, directed against all forms of governmental authority. (18)

In the many critical and personal accounts that form one part of Vietnam representation in Jeffords' definition, a notion of truth has been vital. This partly reflects a need for those involved to tell their stories. Compared to such discourses it is hard to see Rambo as anything

other than insulting. Its pleasures are those of fantasy, not those of testimony. Yet it is clear from Platoon that fantasy is also at work in those films initially hailed as 'realistic' in their portrayal of the conflict. (19) It is not only the hotly-debated issue of realism that is put into question here, but also the issue of whose fantasy, whose story is at stake in the evaluation. The problem with Rambo, in this sense, is the absence of a context: the films that have not been made (or not distributed) and the stories that have not been told. To compound this many of those who made up the film's audience would have been more familiar with 'Vietnam' as a set of generic conventions than as an historical reference point, or perhaps as a historical reference point perceived through generic conventions. (20)

The stories of personal experience that are often told about Vietnam also emerge as generic in some senses. Bruce Jackson has written of his conversations with Vietnam veterans in which, whilst a large proportion could assert that they knew of friends who'd gone through the archetypal 'Nam' experiences, few could themselves testify to such experience. Jackson reports how he asked a class of veterans

"How many people in this room had a buddy who was spat upon by an old lady or a hippie or something like that?"
Maybe a third of the hands went up.

"How many people in this room were spat upon themselves?"

No hands went up (Jackson 1990: 402).

The importance of this for Jackson lies in the way in which the repetition of powerful narratives provides a way to talk about some shared experience, or indeed to make the experience one that is shared, whether it is 'true' or not.

(21) Incidentally, both of the archetypal 'experiences' that are cited by the veterans in Jackson's study, are also referred to in Rambo's final monologue in First Blood.

Much is at stake for cultural critics, if not for all audiences, in Hollywood's representation of Vietnam. Yet the Hollywood cinema has never been committed to, or concerned with, the 'accurate' rendition of history. In their reluctance to engage with underlying economic and political forces, films about Vietnam are little different from Hollywood films about, for example, World War II. Such factors are, by and large, not the concerns of a commercial, entertainment cinema. It is, for Walsh, no defence of Hollywood's Vietnam movies to say that other films are just as 'bad'. Just as there are critical readings that interpret films that are ostensibly concerned with something else as being really 'about Vietnam', the possibility that films ostensibly 'about Vietnam' may be more concerned with other issues, and more interesting to think about in terms of those other issues has received little consideration.

Critical work in recent years has done much to challenge and redefine the supposed objectivity of 'history' as a body of knowledge, asking whose story the discipline takes as its subject. In this context, it is worth noting that when the action cinema does take war as its setting, it is often addressed through the experience of the soldier, in particular through the figure of the 'grunt' who is at the bottom of the military hierarchy. In the much cited line from Rambo - 'Do we get to win this time?' - it is far from clear who this 'we' refers to. This confusion may indicate something of the complexities of the populist address at work in this film. It might also allow us to think about the complexities of the populist address per se.

More generally, the cinematic representation of the hero is bedevilled by the need to provide a space in which he can perform, in which he can be, in Laura Mulvey's words, a dominating 'figure in a landscape' (Mulvey 1989: 20). A definition of the heroic figure emerges as one who is typically outside, if not actually opposed to, the mainstream. He is a loner who accrues an additional romanticism by being out of the ordinary. The (temporary) rejection of violence is, perhaps ironically, a common theme of the contemporary action narrative. This draws on a lengthy tradition of representation in which we see heroes who have rejected their role as soldiers or as officers of the law. The hero has often either retired

from the military and gone to seek life elsewhere, or operates at the periphery of such organisations. Often it is only a personal motivation that can bring the hero out of his 'retirement'. Witness, for example, Chuck Norris' Invasion USA (Joseph Zito, 1985) in which Matt Hunter only enters the battle to save America for the sake of pursuing an old rivalry, and after the death of a close friend.

A populist appeal has been generically associated with the figure of the hero who is outside or apart from state institutions, and who is therefore in a sense untainted by their inevitable corruption. The figure of the individual hero, pitted against the state, draws not only on pioneer rhetoric, but also on those paranoid narratives of the 1970s in which the hero finds himself enmeshed in a conspiracy that ultimately leads either to his own boss, or to the very top of the political, military or law enforcement hierarchy. Of course, such ambiguities about the position of the hero in relation to authority, his loyalties and allegiances, are now clichés expressed, for example, through the hero's ritual assertion that there 'won't be a next time'. Such clichés obviously relate in part to the refinement of the sequel as a cinematic form - we are aware that if the hero is successful in his box-office mission then there may well be a 'next time'.

Populism and the Natural Warrior: 'Do we get to win this time?'

Images of the bodybuilder hero as self-created and as produced for display, are played off against discourses of natural strength, in which he is presented as a gifted individual. Thus Schwarzenegger's character smells the human enemy approaching in Commando, whilst in Predator he covers himself in mud to elude the alien killer. Such images mark his character out as a 'natural warrior', particularly when the hero's self-sufficiency is contrasted to representations of America's high-tech weaponry. The sense of being at home within a natural setting also informs the portrayal of Rambo, who employs the techniques of guerilla warfare, his habitat signalled as the jungle of Vietnam or the American forests of First Blood, in which he tells Sheriff Teasle, "In town you're the law, out here it's me". Such an identification returns us to populist themes, particularly in Rambo's ambiguous alignment with nature and against a technology that is defined as bureaucratic. Despite reference to the oft-seen image of Rambo with rocket-launcher, the bow and arrow and the knife are key weapons within the Rambo narratives. Together with Rambo's Indian/German descent, these weapons invoke the figure of the 'noble savage'. An associated atavism comes to the fore in Rambo's spectacular destruction of computer hardware at the operational base in Thailand.

Rambo's bow and arrow is also high-tech however, combining the image of a simple technology with spectacular explosions. As J Hoberman points out, there is a deliberate, and quite effective, confusion at work in these films between images of conquering nature and identifying with it. His talismanic long hair locates Rambo as 'wild', associated with nature rather than culture - in First Blood Teasle advises him to get a haircut in order to avoid any further police harassment. 'Rambo' says Hoberman

is a superb icon: a hippie he-man...a patriotic loner...a sort of Apache Ubermensch or a Prussian noble savage (Kruger and Mariani (eds) 1989: 187).

Such a collision of qualities offers a complex, and confusing, articulation of masculine identity. Of course Hollywood cinema, indeed popular culture more generally, does not operate within a simple binary system and is routinely able to bring together such sets of seemingly contradictory qualities. The physical power of figures like Rambo, a power that is marked primarily through the body, is showcased within a narrative which also offers the ritualised suffering of the male hero as spectacle.

In her analysis of the Rocky cycle, Valarie Walkerdine writes that boxing 'turns oppression into a struggle to master it, seen as spectacle' (Burgin et al (eds) 1986: 172). She signals class as a key, and somewhat neglected, term through which images of fighting and the male body

need to be conceptualised. The Rocky films point to the way in which the body of the working class man is both subjected (to the rigours of labour) and resistant. This is made explicit in Rocky II with the play of different images of masculine identity. Rocky is commissioned to advertise 'Beast' aftershave, but is fired because he is unable to read the 'Dummy cards' on the set. His illiteracy prevents him from getting an office job, and he is later laid off from the meat factory where he has taken a temporary manual job. These images of failure in the world of work are set against Rocky's plea to his wife, who wishes him to give up fighting, to allow him to 'be a man'. When Rocky works in the meat factory, he is isolated in the frame, clearly distinguished from the rest of the men. In such ways Rocky can be both ordinary, a representative of the group, and extraordinary, an individual able to fight for, and win, the world title.

The character of Rocky is clearly constructed in terms of the Italian immigrant community to which he belongs. In turn, this is opposed to the champ, Apollo Creed, a 'flash' black American who has no clear location within an ethnic, or any other, community. Creed is only seen with his wife in a huge mansion, or with his trainer at work. Creed's articulate speech, his ability to use the media, mark him out as a stylised enemy in both class and racial terms. Creed's story of struggle cannot, it seems, be told within

the Rocky films which offer him up as a rich, and intelligent member of the boxing establishment. That this drama is played out in the boxing ring - one arena in which black men have found a space to perform within American culture - makes Rocky's triumph very much at the expense of a racially constituted other. The contradictions of masculine identity generated in the narrative around class - the working class man, who sells his labour, does not have the resources necessary to 'be a man' - are once more worked out through racial difference.

A key figure from the conspiratorial narratives of the 1970s, which feed into the anti-government feeling of the Rambo films, is that of the investigative journalist. Rambo is initially cast in this role, sent into Vietnam to take pictures of a 'deserted' prison camp, though it is ultimately revealed that the whole escapade is a cover-up and the hero is abandoned by the same government forces who dispatched him. In contrast to the figure of the heroic journalist invoked in All The President's Men (Alan J Pakula, 1976), the physical actor is constructed as inarticulate, unable to speak. In response to the suggestion that Rambo articulated the nations mood, one critic retorts 'Articulate? Hardly. Stallone...substitutes oafish muttering for dialogue'. Rambo is dubbed 'Zombo', a figure who 'grunts' the final speech which is 'the nearest he comes to a full sentence'. (22) Linked to the zombie,

the living dead, Rambo here becomes both a comic and a fearful figure. It was this kind of rhetorical transformation which allowed the use of 'Rambo', within the British press, in an hysterical discourse about violence in the cinema. Within the terms of the film, Rambo is precisely constructed as a 'grunt', as one of the voiceless figures contemplated by Chris Taylor in Platoon. At the same time as Rambo is a 'grunt', he is also given a fantastic strength and a colonial stage on which to play out a fantasy of retribution.

In thinking about the political impact of these films, I want to return to the phrase 'dumb movies for dumb people', the characterisation of muscular cinema as retrograde entertainment for those who know no better. The popular audience emerges here as a powerful figure of the dispossessed, signalling those groups who have been effectively silenced and then designated too 'dumb' to speak. Recalling Rutherford's opposition between 'new man' and 'action man', we can see here how cultural (class) power is associated with an articulate, verbal masculinity, an identity that is played off against a masculinity defined through physicality. In constructing this opposition as if western culture allowed men the freedom to choose, power is simply left out of the equation. In the proliferation of critical writings that seek to explain the 'obvious' ideological project or the 'facile' pleasures of

Rambo, the verbal dexterity of critics is brought to the fore - the film seems to bring out all manner of puns, alliteration, rhetorical flourishes and beautiful turns of phrase. Whilst critics repeatedly assert that there is nothing more to be said, more and more words are generated through a desire to explain the impossible (inexplicable) success of Rambo.

Rambo, a film in the most part distasteful to the reviewers of the liberal press, became an issue owing to its popularity, signalling a concern with the response to the film rather than the film itself, a concern with the audience. For instance Derek Malcolm's Guardian review compared the 'simplistically reactionary' Rambo with the previous summer's Red Dawn (John Milius, 1984), which was less disturbing since less successful. What was at issue for Malcolm, and others, in thinking about Rambo was 'a success so huge that you have to question why'. He suggests that when one does 'only a fool would not be worried that an action movie of this banality should be received with such evident satisfaction'. He writes of 'hundreds of thousands of young Americans baying in the aisles', telling us that we can learn a lesson from Rambo. Our 'knee-jerk liberal horror should be muted' since

It's much better to know what we face than not to admit it. Rambo is an excellent lesson in how the far right gains the support of the very people to whom it should be anathema. Perhaps, in a revolting way the film's good for us. (23)

Here Malcolm sets up and works through an opposition between us and them - the sophisticated liberal us and the passive victims baying in the aisles, them.

Of course the central populist discourse structuring Rambo draws precisely on an us/them dichotomy, however shifting and ambiguous it may be. Indeed the articulation of masculinity and national identity through the figure of the muscular anti-hero offers a more complex set of signifiers than left/liberal discourses can seem to allow. Critical responses to this film, and to the action cinema more generally are deeply paradoxical. Rambo/Stallone is taken to signal a threatening and out of control masculinity, but is both disturbing and ridiculous since he looks like a woman (his 'breasts' and long hair). Rambo represents an all-American call to nationalism which confuses hell and home. Finally, Rambo is criticised for the erasure of history, for a chauvinist dehumanisation of the Vietnamese. Yet surely it is worth questioning why the critical response to this must be to draw on pathologising discourses which radically dehumanise the audience? This questioning further seeks to ask what is at stake in the processes whereby the popular cinema becomes the object of a concerned analysis.

Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that gendered discourses of

nationhood are in themselves complex. The populism that structures many of the films at the centre of this project provides a way of speaking about power without making explicit reference to the political language of class or race. In their place an imagery of a strong yet threatened masculinity, together with a visual rhetoric of 'the people', allows the production of a point of identification with a hero who is both ordinary and superhuman. The chapter that follows explores approaches to gender and representation in more detail.

CHAPTER SIX: THE BODY IN CRISIS OR THE BODY TRIUMPHANT?

Introduction

The success of the muscular male hero, both in the cinema, and as a cultural icon has been read as signifying a variety of phenomena. The title of this chapter offers a choice between two polarised understandings of the muscular hero, whose overdeveloped and overdetermined body has been taken by some to indicate the triumphal assertion of a traditional masculinity, defined through strength, whilst for others he represents an hysterical image, a symptom of the male body (and masculine identity) in crisis. Within either critical perspective the figure of the muscular male hero could be considered as a site for the reinscription of difference. The appropriation of the image of the bodybuilder into a camp repertoire which itself problematises gendered identity, indicates the extent to which this figure can be decoded in a range of ways, is positioned between and across different understandings. The analyses in chapters four and five, of particular star images, and of the deployment of the bodybuilder as hero, suggest a complexity of signification at work in the action film, a complexity that mitigates against the understanding of the muscular hero as a simplistic embodiment of a reactionary masculine identity. This chapter elaborates on this theme in relation to work on gendered representation within film studies.

Masculine identities: critical and cultural visibility

Whether critics view the muscular male body on the screen as triumphal or crisis-ridden, he is generally taken to represent a 'new' man, functioning as a symptomatic figure, a sign of the times. The central question for many critics has consequently become whether such images reassert, mourn or hysterically state a lost male power. An 'either/or' opposition has tended to frame critical discussion of images of masculinity. In thinking about the historical context from which these images of men emerge, as well as the extent to which they draw on and are part of discourses of class and race, it is argued here that it is more appropriate to frame an analysis in terms of 'both/and', a phrasing which allows for a discussion of the multiplicity and instability of meaning. Rather than understanding the muscular male hero as either a reassertion, or a parodic enactment of masculinist values, we can examine the ways in which he represents both, as well as being produced by the ongoing and unsteady relationship between these, and other, images of masculinity.

During the 1980s the proliferation of writings and academic conferences in the field, demonstrated that 'masculinity' had become a critically visible category. Equally, the work of a variety of writers on issues of sexuality has ensured that the diverse gendered identities proposed by the term 'masculinity' cannot be simply equated with a

social group, men. (1) Such critical work, along with the proliferation of images of men within popular culture itself, has led to the current critical stress on the plurality of masculine identities, on masculinities. The emergence of both these critical questions and the images they address, can be partly situated within the historical frame provided by the post-war resurgence of the women's movement. The personal definition of the political that was characteristic of the women's movement at this time found resonance in a range of arenas. Subsequently, feminist and other polemics have been dispersed into a language of choice and lifestyle in a variety of popular discourses. In tandem with this process, men have become, through the 1980s, more overtly targeted as consumers of lifestyle. The invitation extended to western men to define themselves through consumption brings with it a consequent stress on the fabrication of identity, a de-naturalising of the supposed naturalness of male identity.

Current debates over images and gendered identities have made extensive use of the terms offered by psychoanalysis, as a theory of the (unstable and incomplete) acquisition of sexual identity, and the plethora of ideas and images associated with 'postmodernism'. (2) Postmodernism offers a way of speaking about the operations of a culture in which anything can be commodified. As discussed in chapter three, it addresses the flexibility and the ambiguity of

popular culture. More controversially, postmodernism has been used as a framework through which to address the supposed political potential of popular forms. In terms of art practices postmodernism is associated with the play of surfaces, the appropriation and recycling of popular forms within the realm of 'art', the appearance of self-reflexive, parodic texts, and the self-conscious mobilisation of 'style' within narratives that stress plurality. Such emphases have a clear appeal to those diverse social groups who find their stories excluded from mainstream culture, even from mainstream politics, a point to which I return below. Terms such as 'performance' and 'masquerade', which have been crucial to recent feminist writings on the cinema and gendered identity, are also foregrounded within a postmodern discourse about contemporary culture. (3) As signalled in the introduction to this chapter it is possible to argue that the muscular male hero offers a parodic performance of 'masculinity', which both enacts and calls into question the qualities they embody.

Masculinity has been insistently rendered multiple, denaturalised, within both criticism and popular images. The suggestion that meaning is elusive and multiple does not, however, fit easily with the evaluative project of a political cultural criticism, particularly one committed to a radical, modernist avant-garde. The suspicion that

postmodernism, and its associated buzzwords, represents a depoliticised catch-all framework for cultural analysis, emerges precisely at this point, through the work of critics who have questioned the implicit valorisation of popular cultural forms. (4) Such uncertainty, which also contributes to calls for a critical 'return to the real', reacts against those versions of the postmodern which seem to erase power, in which audiences are cast as 'free, gleefully raiding the image bank' (Medhurst 1990: 19). (5) It is crucial to acknowledge that the supposed 'freedom' to make meaning, which has been both embraced and rejected by cultural critics, cannot erase the fact of unequal access to the 'means of production', or indeed the consumption, of images. Yet, I would also argue that postmodernism offers a useful, both descriptive and analytic, framework for thinking about cinematic articulations of masculinities. Indeed, for those whose critical voices have only recently been heard within the academy, harking back to an earlier critical moment in which 'things were simpler', has something of a hollow ring to it.

Film Studies, Television and the 'Performance of Masculinity'

What is the status of the performativity that has been attributed to masculinity in the contemporary cinema? How can we account, for example, for the increased marketability of the male body? One immediate context is

that offered by the changing definitions, within a shifting economy, of the roles that men and women are called on to perform, particularly in that crucial arena of gender definition, the world of work. Richard Dyer notes a recent tendency for male stars, such as Clint Eastwood and Harrison Ford

either to give their films a send-up or tongue-in-cheek flavour...or else a hard, desolate, alienated quality.

Dyer speculates that in a world 'of microchips and a large scale growth (in the USA) of women in traditionally male occupations' the adoption of such tones suggest that the 'values of masculine physicality are harder to maintain straightforwardly and unproblematically' (Dyer 1987: 12). (6)

Barbara Creed's suggestion that the pin-up muscleman star can be understood within the critical frameworks of postmodernism, also picks up on the tendency of images and texts in the 1980s to 'play with the notion of manhood'. Creed suggests that Stallone and Schwarzenegger could only be described as 'performing the masculine', a performance that she speaks of in terms of the failure of the paternal signifier, a theme to which I return at the end of this chapter (Creed 1987: 65). For Creed it is the sheer physical excess of the muscular stars that indicates the performative status of the masculinity they enact. That the terms of her analysis has^{ve} a wider purchase on contemporary texts, can be exemplified with reference to Michael Mann's 1980s television crime series Miami Vice, a

show that has repeatedly functioned as a point of reference for critical discussions of both postmodernism and masculinity.

Andrew Ross locates the construction of the male body as sexual spectacle in Miami Vice in terms of both the generic history from which the show evolved, and the cultural moment of the 1980s in which it became so popular. Ross identifies a 'maverick concern with sex' in Miami Vice, locating this within an American context in which the series is seen to make a 'contradictory response' to the operations of campaigning groups who lobbied against advertisers sponsoring programmes deemed 'indecent or obscene', effectively setting a moral agenda for the networks. Ross goes on to argue that 'in a post-censorship climate', in which 'naked male flesh is still permissible' whilst 'female is not' then

the widespread incidence of that male flesh in Miami Vice has become both the medium for developing a discourse about sexuality within the show and also a primary means of selling the show as TV commodity' (Ross 1986: 150).

The cultural specificity invoked in this analysis allows us to see the show within a specific production context. The taboos which surround the marketing of the male body as sexual object can, like any other, be broken in the relentless search for new commodities and new markets.

The ambiguous meaning of 'America' within the world of Miami Vice echoes the populist themes of the action film. Both share anti-government sentiments, showcased within a violent narrative, which force the hero to act. Within American culture, Miami has often been imaged as the site of potential invasion, a space for drugs and immigrants, both defined as utterly 'foreign', to infiltrate American territory. Its proximity to Cuba makes Miami the chosen site from which to launch a Russian/Cuban invasion of America in the Chuck Norris vehicle Invasion USA. While Miami Vice has been framed by a notion of 'fortress America', with the cops protecting the nation against all the others, America is always already revealed to be full of crooks. By the end of the series, after a detour in Latin America, Crockett and Tubbs finally realise the extent of American involvement in the world of vice. Confronted with a corruption that goes all the way to the top, they can do nothing but leave, since their performance of masculinity and of heroism is over. The police hero giving up his/her badge, represents a familiar generic moment. The final episode of Miami Vice invokes countless narratives of conspiracy and corruption with the line 'this mission never existed'. This is in a sense the epigraph of the whole series. For Crockett and Tubbs the war against drugs is able to 'explain' social unrest at home as well as 'justify' imperialism abroad and yet if, as happens in the

final episode, they lose this impossible point of reference, their very identity dissolves. (7)

The overdetermined figure of drugs in Miami Vice functions as a 'bad' system of exchange, a metaphor for the evils of capitalism which still allows for the possibility that capitalism can function simultaneously as a 'good' system, exemplified in the other forms of consumption that are celebrated in the series. And yet this escape clause cannot ultimately be made good so that, in the end, Crockett and Tubbs can only walk away. In a similar vein, all Rambo can do is to destroy (temporarily) the technology of the military bureaucracy before also walking away - into the mythicised sunset to live 'day by day'. In none of these narratives can the hero finally function effectively within America. In the narrative logic of Miami Vice identity is, at best, tenuous since the heroes' success depends absolutely on being misrecognised as their own object. That is, as undercover cops, Crockett and Tubbs must masquerade as the very drug-dealers they hunt. In one series of episodes Crockett, suffering from amnesia, actually adopts his drug-dealer persona 'for real'.

As Andrew Ross has pointed out, 'doubleness' is absolutely central to the show, even to its title - which refers to both the object of investigation (vice, particularly drugs, in Miami) and the cry with which the police identify

themselves. For Ross the 'central representational problem is the difficulty of exhibiting difference at all' (Ross 1986: 152). The problem of difference identified here is echoed by the cop hero of another Michael Mann narrative, Made in LA/LA Takedown (1989), who mournfully tells his girlfriend that 'tonight I made no difference'. The cityscape of Mann's narratives are populated by figures who struggle, like this cop, to 'make a difference' but who are ultimately unable to do so. The hero of Thief/Violent Streets (1981) can only survive by blowing everything up, whilst the hero of Manhunter (1986), being unable to preserve a line between himself and the psychotic serial killer he hunts, calls his own sanity into question.

Scott Benjamin King's analysis of Miami Vice echoes Richard Dyer's comments on the world of work. King offers a critique of those who understood the stylised visual beauty of the series and of its male protagonists, via postmodernism, as a narrative emptiness, seeing such perspectives as, at worst, a rather alarmingly literal interpretation of the 'end of narrative'. Instead of seeing the series as pure spectacle, as a refusal of narrative, King points out that Vice offers the repeated reenactment of narratives of failure, the significance of which he locates within the context of contemporary articulations of masculinity. A reorientation of the relationship between men, masculinity and consumption in

the west, necessarily effects those definitions of male identity achieved through production. King surmises that

if postmodernism is a crisis of the excess of consumption, and, further, a crisis related to shifting definitions of masculinity, it is also a crisis in the concept of work' (King 1990: 286).

In particular King signals the importance, in the construction of Sonny Crockett's character, of failure within the realm of work. Crockett's work consists of catching villains, work that he is unable to perform effectively, work that is carried out in a context over which he has no control. A lack of control, accompanied by a sense of placelessness, is a defining feature of the action hero in films such as Die Hard, in which John McClane finds himself in an impossible situation controlled by an incompetent bureaucracy. It is perhaps the failure of work, the lack of effectivity of his efforts that allows for an understanding of the cynical outlook of the populist hero who emerges in the 1960s and 1970s, and who remains central to the contemporary action film.

For film studies an investigation of the male body on the screen has been framed by feminist analyses of representations of the female body, developed over the last twenty years. Writing of Robert De Niro, in the role of boxer Jake La Motta, in Raging Bull (Martin Scorsese, 1980), Pam Cook neatly sums up the concerns of this critical trajectory in a question:

If, as feminist film theory has argued, classic Hollywood is dedicated to the playing out of male Oedipal anxieties across the woman's body, object of the 'male' gaze, what does it mean to place the male body at the centre? (Cook 1982: 42).

It is this question and the critical framework it proposes, that has dominated inquiries into representations of the male body and of masculinity in the cinema. Attempts to think through an answer to this question have been made problematic by a binary opposition of active/passive, an opposition which has structured feminist commentaries on the representation and articulation of gender in the cinema.

This opposition was invoked most famously by Laura Mulvey, in her assertion that both pleasure in looking and narrative structure have been organised around a split 'between active/male and passive/female' (Mulvey 1989: 19). Since, within the mainstream cinema, 'the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification' (ibid: 20), man is a figure who looks while woman is to be looked at. Mulvey's important polemic thus confronted the mainstream cinema at two levels, though the equation between 'active/male' and 'passive/female' are central to both. Grafted onto a psychoanalytically informed account of the structures of looking involved in the cinema, is a commentary on the typical narrative structure of the Hollywood film and the roles that men and women have tended to play within these cinematic narratives. Thinking about

the contemporary action cinema involves a redefinition of Mulvey's model at these two levels, in order to take account of both changes in the formal operations of Hollywood cinema, and developments in the theorisation of sexuality and spectatorship.

Taking Mulvey's account as his point of departure, Neale explores issues of identification, spectacle and the representation of the male body as erotic object within the Hollywood cinema. He argues, in relation to action-based genres, such as the western and the epic, that an eroticism around the male body is displaced into ritualised scenes of conflict, since it cannot be explicitly acknowledged.

Neale cites instances, from the musical and the melodrama, in which the male body is constructed as an erotic object, specifically referring to the representation of Rock Hudson in Sirk's melodramas. While there are moments, Neale argues, in which 'Hudson is presented quite explicitly as the object of an erotic look' the look is 'usually marked as female', and Hudson's 'body is feminised', a process that Neale takes as a demonstration

of the strength of the conventions which dictate that only women can function as the objects of an explicitly erotic gaze (Neale 1983: 14-15).

The feminine here is assumed to equate with women in a rather unproblematic fashion, and whilst Neale's analysis is a useful one, there is an evident danger of falling into

a circular logic. That is, Hudson is described as 'feminised' because he is eroticised in these films.

That such equations are premised on a stable gender binary, which is underpinned by a heterosexual understanding of desire and difference, is indicated by Judith Butler, when she asks what would happen

to the subject and the stability of gender categories when the epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality is unmasked as that which produces and reifies these ostensible categories of ontology? (Butler 1989: x).

As Butler explores in her book, whilst shifting these regimes of knowledge and classification is problematic, going along with their assumptions of coherence may be more so. In the case of Neale's example, we find the female gaze directed at a 'feminised' Rock Hudson. Hudson's 'feminised' image in these films is then equated by Neale with women, through reference to the cinematic conventions which allow 'only women' to be positioned as the explicit objects of an erotic gaze. (8)

If it is dangerous to rely on the assumed stability of a gender binary, we might also ask what it means to place the 'male gaze' at the centre of an analysis of mainstream cinema. What once provided an enabling critical concept, now seems almost completely disempowering in its effects, operating as a term which fixes an analysis within the

restrictions of the very gendered system it seeks to question. Though masculinities are bisected and experienced through a range of differences, feminist film criticism often seems to map onto the cinema a peculiarly heightened narrative of male power and female powerlessness. It is in this sense that the eroticised male body comes to be critically spoken of as 'feminised'. While the action hero is repeatedly subject to suffering within the narrative of which he is the centre, it is his triumph over this suffering that has been critically emphasised. Thus Rambo is repeatedly cited as an unproblematic enactment of male power, despite the ambiguities operating both within the film itself and in the discourses surrounding it. It may well be the case that feminist discourses have, inadvertently, informed this process, through the ways in which women are constructed as victims and men as all-powerful, as, for example, in discussions around pornography. (9)

At a more specific level, an address to the transformation of film genres over time is an important area of inquiry that can be effaced by an attention to structures taken as 'universal' or 'transhistorical'. To take an example from a different context here, Kobena Mercer draws attention to the significance of authorship, and of historical and cultural contexts for thinking about the political meanings and the pleasures of Robert Mapplethorpe's black male

nudes. In the context of an attack against 'obscene' gay art in the States, Mercer rethinks an earlier essay on the pictures, along with his position as spectator. This process involves thinking, and rethinking, spectator/text relations as relations of power that are nonetheless historically contingent (in *Bad Object Choices* eds. 1991).

Whilst psychoanalysis has itself been criticised for its universal and transhistorical assumptions, it provides a theory which, at least potentially, allows us to speak outside of pathologising definitions of the normal and the deviant. Simon Watney, for example, compares a psychoanalysis which 'proceeds from a radical distrust of any attempt to privilege one form of object choice over another', to the operations of gender theory, which

tends inexorably to foreground an exclusively heterosexual model of sexual relations which is then found, as excess or as absence, in other sexualities (Watney 1986: 16).

His critique of gender theory centres on the problematic terms 'active/male' and 'passive/female'. Watney indicates that the

slippage from "male" to "active" not only has profound consequences in relation to the parallel slippage "female" to "passive" but also in relation to the evaluation of all non-heterosexual desires and practices (ibid).

For Watney then, the logic of gender theory conveniently functions in order to achieve the

immediate reinforcement of the rhetorical figures of man and woman, figures who recur throughout feminist cultural theory and linguistics locked forever in post-

Edenic opposition (ibid: 16-17).

Whilst a certain ambivalence can be identified around the active/passive couple in representations of the male body, critics have often characterised this as a tension that is raised and instantly resolved within the confines of the image. As Slavoj Zizek remarks in relation to anti-Semitism, an ideology 'really succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favour' (Zizek 1989: 49). Thus instances of the eroticised male body in the cinema can operate to confirm that only women are ever eroticised.

In her 'Afterthoughts', Laura Mulvey discusses the Hollywood western-melodrama Duel in the Sun (King Vidor, 1946) as a dramatisation of the restrictive choice available to the female viewer. Like the heroine Pearl, who must choose between two men, the female viewer must choose either masculinisation or masochism. For women watching the action film, identification with the figure of the hero involves a problematic 'masculinisation'. Mulvey argues that 'Hollywood genre films structured around masculine pleasure' offer 'an identification with the active point of view' and thus:

allow a woman spectator to rediscover that lost aspect of her sexual identity, the never fully-repressed bed-rock of feminine neurosis (Mulvey 1989: 31).

For the female protagonist to make such an active identification has generally meant aligning oneself with

narrative death, as in Thelma and Louise, though the film is interesting in its presentation of death as an active choice made by the film's protagonists. Though Mulvey suggests that 'the female spectator's fantasy of masculinisation' is 'at cross-purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes', I would argue for a positioning of this transgressive fantasy within the more general pleasures of the cinema (ibid: 37). That is, to return to the point at which this chapter began, the cinema offers one of the few social spaces in which we can make seemingly perverse identifications, structured by a utopian both/and rather than a repressive gendered binary.

The processes of shifting identifications within the action cinema involve the play of both 'passive' and 'active' identifications. The action scenario is not simply a narrative of empowerment, in which we identify with a heroic figure who triumphs over all obstacles, but is also a dramatisation of the social limits of power. Such scenarios are complex in that they invite an acknowledgement, and a working through, of the position of the audience in relation to the hierarchies sketched in the drama. In a paper on men and masculinity Lynne Segal, author of Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, has argued that, as part of a contemporary process of redefining established, 'tough' masculine identities, men should begin to explore the 'pleasures of passivity' - an exploration

that conjures up the figure of the 'new man'. (10) Segal's point raises a question here as to the pleasures of the insistent images of powerlessness and suffering that are offered in the action cinema.

The 'pleasures of passivity' however, are differently available to different groups, experienced as they are in relation to the limits of power. For marginalised groups, constituted through 'race' and class, screen images of either sexual passivity or a fearful violence represent the stereotypical limits of cinematic discourse. In this context, it is striking that Duel In The Sun, the western-melodrama to which Mulvey refers, articulates its themes of sexual identity through images of racial difference. Pearl must chose between the cultured world of wealth and restraint represented by Jesse, and the wild, outlaw figure of Lewt. The tension within the narrative comes from Pearl's own rebelliousness, her resistance to and desire for the conventions of the social world. In the opening sequences of the film this tension is figured through Pearl's 'mixed' racial descent. Her white father is represented as a noble, long-suffering, loving man, whilst her Mexican mother, who is shot for her adultery, is portrayed as sexual and treacherous. The mother is seen only through an extended sequence in which she dances inside a bar-cum-gambling hall, whilst the father shares an extended, sentimental scene with Pearl before he dies.

Though the two are differentiated, Pearl mimics her mother's dancing, situated on the street outside the gambling house. The different constructions of white American and Mexican inform the understanding of desire that is offered in the film, partially legitimating Lewt's treatment of Pearl, through myths of an exaggerated sexuality that is attributed to a racial other. Pearl's own restlessness, her active desire for more than either of the choices offered, is mediated through the fact that she does not clearly 'fit' in either space. In such ways the Hollywood cinema mobilises the terms of activity/passivity not only in relation to gender, but through the construction of 'race' as a category, which is in turn often expressed through images and ideas of sexuality.

The Bodybuilder: Masculinity in Crisis?

This discussion of activity and passivity allows us to recall the iconography which surrounds the practice of bodybuilding and the image of the bodybuilder. As Richard Dyer comments in his discussion of male pin-ups, the requirements of active definitions of masculinity generate a need to compensate for the display of the eroticised male body. Thus 'when not actually caught in an act, the male image still promises activity by the way the body is posed'. Since:

images of men must disavow...passivity if they are to be kept in line with dominant ideas of masculinity-as-activity (Dyer 1982: 66-67).

Neale's (1983) view of the fight as a site of displaced eroticism within Hollywood's action genres, can clearly be seen in this context. It is perhaps inevitable therefore that it is the action cinema which provides a showcase for the display of the muscular male body.

As signifiers of masculinity, muscles present a paradox since they bring together the terms of naturalness and performance. Dyer has characterised this in terms of the way in which muscles function as both a naturalisation of 'male power and domination' and as evidence precisely of the labour that has gone into the production of that effect (Dyer 1982: 71). The 'strain' that Dyer identifies in the male pin-up stems from this paradox, from the self-conscious performance of qualities assumed to be natural. The performance of a muscular masculinity within the cinema draws attention to both the restraint and the excess involved in 'being a man', the work put into the male body. Bodybuilding has been associated with a narcissism considered culturally inappropriate for men, betraying a supposedly feminine concern with appearance. Thus, whilst Schwarzenegger's stardom has done much to redefine the image of the bodybuilder, in terms of 'heroism and health', traces of the other aspect of the persona identified by Alan Richman, that of an excessive narcissism, remains.

(11)

Negative reviews of Rambo, for example, cast the figure of the bodybuilder as womanly - the display of his upper body generates a comparison with Jane Russell. Though this has been most often discussed in terms of women's involvement in the sport, there is a sense in which bodybuilding does trouble the categories through which sex, as well as gender, is designated in our culture. The pumped-up male and female bodies found in action films and on the bodybuilding circuit, are physically similar. Against, for example, a slim, languid image of adolescent androgyny, which is familiar from fashion pages, the mature (overdeveloped) body itself is very much emphasised in the world of the bodybuilder. The extent to which the bodybuilder troubles the categories of both sex and gender are visually evident, even celebrated, in the display of the body that defines the sport.

If there is an ambivalence located around the masculinity of the male bodybuilder whose body is offered for pleasure and display, this ambivalence is also present, though less forcefully, in other images of the male body.

Representations of men and women, indeed the categories of masculinity and femininity themselves are shot through with such ambivalence. This is because neither masculinity nor femininity operate as clear sets of qualities that can be fixed in relation to the body. Such instability indicates the problems involved in reading contemporary images of

masculine identity in a search for the signs of 'crisis'. To speculate about the recent emergence of a crisis in masculinity, implies that masculinity represented, say until the 1960s, a stable category.

Qualifying assumptions of such a stability stand^s ~~to take~~ ~~just one example~~, critical work which has explored the complex constitution of masculinity and sexuality in relation to colonial discourse in the nineteenth century.

(12) We might more usefully think about representations in terms of the particular ways in which the insecurities of masculine identities are made manifest at any given point. The figure of Rambo has been seen, for example, as signifying a masculinity in crisis, representing the limit case of the American tough guy. It is not only the box-office popularity of this figure, but the critical responses which sought to read him as symptomatic that produced this reading, at a particular historical moment. Rowena Chapman understands the relationship between the 'new man' and the male action hero in the following terms

The Macho is representative of traditional armour-plated masculinity from Bogart to Bronson, a whole panoply of atomised and paranoid manhood wreaking order through destruction; its apotheosis is the figure of Rambo, bare-chested and alone, wading through the Vietcong swamp, with not even a tube of insect repellent for comfort. Given this hard-nosed agenda, the new man was an attempt to resolve some of the obvious contradictions of the Classic Macho, to recognise and make peace with the feminine within itself, in response to feminist critiques (Chapman and Rutherford (eds) 1988: 227).

I have already suggested that the 'new man' and the 'action

man' are complexly interrelated terms. It is important to appreciate that the 1980s redefinition of the action man/hero also responds to feminism in complex ways, and not just as part of a 'backlash'. Any 'tradition' of representation involves both continuity and change, so that the figures Chapman invokes - Bogart, Bronson and Rambo - represent distinct and historically located articulations of heroic male identities. (13)

The 'contradictions of the Classic Macho' to which Chapman refers, also emerge from the specific historical contexts in which these identities have developed. Macho culture represents one, complex, response to oppression - an attempt to assert a power which has precisely been denied. In the same volume Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer draw on the work of Fanon in pointing to the complexity of both stereotypes and identities constructed 'in and through the histories of slavery, colonialism and imperialism'. They suggest that

black men have incorporated a code of 'macho' behaviour in order to recuperate some degree of power over the condition of powerlessness and dependency in relation to the white slave-master (ibid: 136).

Julien and Mercer discuss how the complex interaction of stereotypical representations and actual behaviour, which is forged in cultural history, produces particular identities that are both 'true' and 'fictional' at the same

time. Such an interaction is crucial to the location of a white, male, Italian ethnicity in the Rocky films. (14)

Returning to Chapman's 'new man', it is no surprise that the figure to which she refers has tended to be associated with the white, middle class. This does not mean that black, or white working-class male cultures have simply not responded to feminist issues. Many writers have pointed, for example, to the ambiguities of both gendered and racial identities at work in popular music. (15) To take an example specific to the action cinema, we can recall here Stallone's attempts to qualify a macho persona through the increasingly explicit mobilisation of conventional signifiers of femininity. Alongside this process we have seen how several critics have described the figure of Rambo as demonstrating a failed masculinity, particularly in terms of his inability to speak, but also centred on his physical appearance - breasts, hair, eyes. These understandings emphasise the need to situate an analysis within the diversity of images of masculine identity in cultural circulation at any one point, and to acknowledge the histories that have produced them.

In Heartbreak Ridge Clint Eastwood, as Gunnery Sergeant Tom Highway, wrestles with his own military toughness in an attempt to achieve a reconciliation with his wife, a reconciliation which is finally brought about by the

conflict in Grenada. As the publicity for the film had it, Highway is 'a hard-drinking loner but he's trying to reorganise his life and understand the woman he loves'. In order to 'understand' Highway stumbles his way through women's magazines, struggling with the language of relationships. He painfully asks his ex-wife 'did we mutually nurture each other...did we communicate in a meaningful way in our relationship?' The existence of feminism and the problems of a tough masculinity, which formed an essential part of Eastwood's role as Wes Block in Tightrope (Richard Tuggle, 1984) becomes a structuring joke in Heartbreak Ridge. The language of nurturing and relationships is placed in a context that makes it seem comical. That is the context of the training camp movie, a sub-genre of the war film, in which young male rebels are made into marines, instructed in a regimented masculinity.

In such a setting individuality and choice are necessarily relegated to the background. Stanley Kubrick's Full Metal Jacket is perhaps the most extreme version of this formula, subjecting the audience to an analogous experience through its relentless use of abusive language and images. (16)

The joke in Heartbreak Ridge is not at the expense of women or feminism as such. Rather, and particularly when taken alongside the incessant verbal references to homosexuality in the film, it demonstrates a certain awareness of the cultural context within which the cinema operates, and in

which the film will be received. Heartbreak Ridge struggles to maintain an unproblematic, heterosexual male group, with Eastwood's character barking out reminders to his charges that he didn't join the army to take long showers with his men. Featured across a range of recent action films, such as Lethal Weapon and Tango and Cash, this repeated insistence threatens to draw attention to the very fact of homosexual desire that it seeks to deny. Demolition Man turns the convention itself into a joke. John Spartan/Stallone, revived from an artificial sleep, exchanges affectionate abuse with an old colleague. Sandra Bullock/Lenina Huxley explains to her bemused future-world police colleagues that 'this is how insecure heterosexuals used to bond'.

Hollywood mythology thrives on paradox. It generates a multitude of stories of excess, one of which revolves around the star's rise from rags to riches, obscurity to fame. The world of bodybuilding similarly offers men the promise of moving from wimp to Mr Universe. We can recall here the mode of address used by bodybuilding magazines. At an explicit level the reader is invited to emulate the figures depicted, to work out and develop his/her own body. Admiring descriptions of the male body are firmly positioned within the context of the workout, encouraging the reader to become an active consumer within bodybuilding culture. The bodybuilder as film star combines then, two

potent narratives of male success within western culture. Well aware of this formula, stories of the lucky breaks and hard work through which the star achieves his/her position, also form the basis for many of the narratives of the action cinema, which follow the struggles of the hero to succeed.

Whilst the pleasures of a narcissistic identification with a powerful figure are clearly on offer in an audience's relationship to the action film, the action narrative also, as we have seen in relation to Miami Vice, acknowledges repeated failures, pointing out the frustrations of the hero's position. This play of success and failure is also found in the stories which circulate around the stars, forming part of the ongoing star melodrama which is played out in magazines and in the popular press. The typical repertoire of the star melodrama includes not only political involvement but marriages, divorces, children, assertions and denials of homosexuality, alcohol and drug abuse and so on.

Bearing in mind the complexity of the circulation of meanings at stake in the star system, we can consider the specificity of the stories surrounding the muscular star. The publication of an unauthorised biography of Schwarzenegger, Wendy Leigh's Arnold, whilst it alleged past associations with right-wing politics, and extreme

arrogance, quickly contributed to and became part of the star's image. Such political rumours, and the party politics of Schwarzenegger's campaigning for George Bush, which place him in the public realm, are situated alongside stories of a commodified private life, as with, for example, stories about his daughter's illness. The combination of such elements has the effect of producing the star's life as melodrama. The muscular star is here rendered through a myth of ordinary^{ness}. (17) One biography of Stallone, released in Britain after the success of Rambo, features an anecdote which works through this process in terms of bodybuilding and the performance of a masculine identity. Stallone is described as an underdeveloped child, suffering from a variety of physical disabilities and teased for his girlish name. The narrative that is set up here is, in common with that frequently elaborated around Schwarzenegger, a 'before and after' story in which bodybuilding provides the key to the successful achievement of a masculine identity.

As part of its rhetoric of self-improvement, Muscle and Fitness magazine cites an anecdote of Sylvester Stallone seeing Steve Reeves in Hercules Unchained:

When he walked out of the theatre afterwards, Sly remembers an unremitting inner voice demanding, "Do you want to be a bum, or do you want to be like Steve Reeves?" (June 1989).

Fantasised cinema images are recycled and offered, second-

hand, as a possibility to the reader. The pin-up which displays the star's body alongside the interview, functions as 'proof' for the reader that the enactment of this fantasy identification is possible. Bodybuilding is offered as a form of protection which speaks to insecurity. Within this discourse the body itself functions as a sort of armour against the world. Appealing to an ideal of self-reliance, the discourse of bodybuilding aspires to make the body signify a physical invulnerability. But the fact of vulnerability always remains a key part of the bodybuilding narrative. The best-selling workout videos and books produced by men such as Schwarzenegger and Dolph Lundgren offer a how-to guide for the body. (18) The title of Chuck Norris's autobiography The Secret of Inner Strength is self-explanatory in this context, with Norris offering his own code of ethics and advice on 'How to Make Your Life Better'.

The project of a book like Stallone! A Hero's Story is to explore the familiar star-biography terms emblazoned on the cover: 'A Fighter, A Lover, A Superstar'. As part of the publicity machine the book seeks to give its readers a picture of the 'real' Stallone, who is cast as both powerful and vulnerable, the same doubleness operating in discourses of bodybuilding. The book frames this dichotomy in terms of Stallone's two most famous personas, so that he is described as wearing a 'cool, confident, almost Rambo-

like face' in public whilst in private he is 'adoring and Rocky-like' (Rovin 1985: 204). This doubling further mirrors the two personas of the hero that Valerie Walkerdine finds in Rocky II. The interior sets for the film, Walkerdine comments

are made especially small so that he looks giant-size and yet remains a "small man" in the outside world: a man who has to fight and to struggle therefore "to be" the big man at home' (Burgin et.al. (eds) 1986: 173).

This is a specifically domestic version of the play which structures the action movie, between the hero as a powerful figure with whom we can identify, and the hero as a threatened figure, in need of the protection that only the developed body can offer.

Performance as a constituting quality of masculinity involves not just physical potency but a sense of acting the part, playing out a male persona on a public stage. Chuck Norris came to his film career from an involvement in karate as both a teacher and, of course, as world champion. He appears as Bruce Lee's opponent in the grand finale battle (set in Rome's colosseum) in Way of the Dragon (Bruce Lee, 1973). In his autobiography, Norris talks of the challenge that acting posed to him. This challenge is expressed in terms of performance, the different skills involved in performing karate and performing for the camera:

In karate you are never to reveal anger or fear to your opponent. For years I taught myself to control my emotions and not to show them. When I began to act, I

suddenly had to learn to bring all these guarded feelings to the surface' (Norris 1990: 144).

Here control of the emotions forms an additional layer of protection for the fighter. The need for protection can, in turn, be linked to a fear of contamination and to more general fears about the body and its relation to technology which have been addressed by critics under the rubric of 'body horror'. (19) In the cinema of the 1980s Frankenstein's monster has been transformed into a cyborg, like Schwarzenegger as the Terminator or RoboCop. Even in Schwarzenegger's comedy Twins, he is cast as the result of genetic engineering, manufactured to be both physically stronger and intellectually superior to the rest of humanity.

The fact of the performance of the tough guy persona, that it is part of a ritualised conflict enacted around the social control of space, is often an explicit part of the contemporary action picture, as in the intricate verbal play that is worked through in The Last Boy Scout. Cobra, a relative failure at the box-office, sends up certain aspects of the tough-guy persona, with Marion Cobretti/Stallone joking that he really wanted to be called Alice. That 'Marion' was John Wayne's 'real' name is telling in terms of the performance of a (cinematic) tough male identity. Cobretti is pitted against a villainous gang who seem to be engaged in some form of pagan worship

and whose members speak hysterically of a new world order. The figure of Cobretti is, like Rambo, detached from the world of officialdom, relegated to work on the 'zombie squad'. In terms of the film's relative failure, we might speculate that he is not 'outside' enough, operating as he does as an agent of the state. Cobretti is an efficient killing machine, who is called in to 'off the bad guys' when all else has failed. There is little separation between him and his job, with his home visualised as an extension of the office, complete with surveillance equipment and files. Unlike Rambo though, he is a representative and not a victim of the state. And unlike Harry Callahan in the Dirty Harry films, or Travis Bickle in Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese, 1976), two heroes dedicated to the eradication of impurity, Cobretti is not pathologised. Rather he is hidden, beneath his gloves, his dark glasses and the protection offered by the built body.

In Cobra the body of the hero has no space in which to operate except as an overdetermined version of the state. This is precisely the role played by Schwarzenegger in The Terminator, a film in which he is ultimately revealed to be literally a machine, operating in the service of computers from the future, who have taken over the world and are trying to wipe out the impurity that is humanity. Schwarzenegger achieved cult status with the film, yet we are put in the position of identifying with Sarah Connor,

the heroine who takes on, and destroys, the Terminator. Whilst Schwarzenegger's Terminator masquerades in cultish shades and black leather, his opponent in the sequel, the more sophisticated T1000, assumes the form of a uniformed Los Angeles police officer. Institutions are often problematic in the genre, frequently corrupt and not worth defending, so that a personal quest must motivate the hero. The hero may be a policeman or a soldier, but he more often than not acts unofficially, against the rules and often in a reactive way, responding to attacks rather than initiating them.

The action hero recognises that he is, as Rambo puts it, 'expendable'. Representatives of the state utter myriad variants on the line that 'this mission never existed'. Temporarily reinstated in the forces and sent back to Vietnam in Rambo, the hero cuts away most of his government issued high-tech equipment before he even lands. His final frustrated gesture at the end of the film, is to destroy the government's computer hardware at the operational base in Thailand, screaming as cartridges are sprayed everywhere. The confusions of nature and technology, in for example the characterisation of Rambo as a sort of high-tech 'noble savage', perhaps indicate a need to see the muscular body as more than a machine, as self-created rather than state-created, as it seems to be in Cobra.

This tension is made explicit in the training montage from Rocky IV. (20) In this film Rocky is to fight the Russian champion Ivan Drago/Dolph Lundgren. Rocky journeys to Russia to take on Drago, who has killed his mentor Apollo Creed in the ring. Rocky goes to train in a remote house surrounded by snow, ice, mountains and the KGB. The montage cuts between parallel images of Drago and Rocky training. Drago is seen surrounded by officials, monitored by numerous machines, images of mechanisation and control which culminate in a close-up of him being injected with steroids. Rocky meanwhile is supported only by the small team made up of Paulie, Adrian and his trainer. The two men's exercises dynamically mirror each other, but are contrasted as Rocky's training includes images of him chopping logs, helping peasants and so forth. His training culminates in the triumphal ascent of a mountain which a revolving camera celebrates from above. This sentimental opposition of a populist, self-created muscular strength and an artificial, mechanical tool of the state is a crucial one, restating the hero's control over his body.

The action cinema's play with figures of power and powerlessness incorporates the set piece revelation of the body of the hero. Within this structure, suffering and torture in particular, operates as both a set of narrative hurdles to be overcome (tests that the hero must survive) and as a set of aestheticised images to be lovingly dwelt

on. Relatively few studies seem to comment in any depth on the figure of the male hero in this context, pursued and punished as he so often is. Pam Cook's analysis of Raging Bull sees the film as working through 'the loss of male power' which follows from the presentation of 'the powerful male body as an object of desire and identification', a loss which, since we mourn it, centres yet again 'the founding image of male power, the phallus' (Cook 1982: 43). Raging Bull tells the tragic story of Jake La Motta succumbing to his own position of powerlessness, losing the 'animal violence' which had stood for 'a resistance to exploitation, a desire for freedom' (ibid: 46). Such struggles and desires are central themes of the boxing narrative and they also, as we have seen, form an important part of the mythology surrounding the male action star in Hollywood.

Boxing brings together the display of the male body with images of male power and powerlessness. In the ring and outside it the male body is both subjected and resistant. A space of spectacle and struggle, for Krutnik the boxing ring:

becomes an enclosed arena of masculine performance, a site of contest between two skimpily-clad contenders who enact a ritualistic and idealised fantasy of masculine potency (Krutnik 1991: 190).

Yet the boxing ring has also frequently been used in films as a metaphor for corruption and oppression. (21) In the

Rocky films, both the hero and his opponents are subject to an excessive punishment that is pictured in the carefully choreographed fights. These fights are lovingly shot in slow-motion, providing a counterpoint to the rapid montage of the training sequences. The boxer is also subject to the mobsters and promoters who live off the fighter. He is resistant then to both the physical blows - surviving, going the distance - and to the machinations of those who 'want a piece'.

Such physical struggles for self-control and for control over the body provide a powerful set of associations in the boxing narrative. An exchange between Rocky and Adrian in the original Rocky voices these themes. The couple's first date takes place on Thanksgiving in a deserted ice-rink. Rocky talks of how he became a fighter and his father's advice that 'you weren't born with much of a brain, so you'd better start using your body'. To this Adrian replies that her mother had told her the reverse: 'you weren't born with much of a body so you'd better develop your brain'. These two options succinctly outline the possible escape routes for working class men and women. Valerie Walkerdine's analysis, discussed above, locates class as a key factor in thinking through the ways in which fighting, violence and the male body are conceptualised in the boxing narrative, suggesting an understanding of the

films 'as a counterpoint to the experience of oppression and powerlessness' (Burgin et.al. (eds) 1986: 172).

Fanon's comments on the powerlessness of a colonised people, in The Wretched of the Earth, can serve to highlight here the relationship between a physical fantasy and relations of power

The first thing which the native learns is to stay in his place, and not go beyond certain limits. This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and of aggression. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing; I dream that I burst out laughing, that I span a river in one stride, or that I am followed by a flood of motor-cars which never catch up with me. During the period of colonization, the native never stops achieving his freedom from nine in the evening until six in the morning (Fanon 1985: 40).

These nocturnal fantasies emphasise the ways in which images of a physical power function as a counterpoint to an experience of the world defined by restrictive limits.

Fanon describes a situation in which these limits are enacted over the body through colonial discourse - it is these limits that generate the fantasy of physical activity. This analysis can be extended in thinking about the operation of other kinds of limits, since 'the body is not a "being," but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated' (Butler 1991: 139).

If Rocky offers the boxing narrative as a drama of limits this is also, as I have already discussed, at the expense of a black opponent constituted as other. This is to say

that within these fictions we can identify the operation of different kinds of limits.

Rocky's (Italian) whiteness has a specific set of meanings when placed within the context of boxing. He represents the 'great White Hope', taking on the black champion, Apollo Creed. (22) Since the scenarios of the Rocky films have little to do with the world of professional boxing, this question also needs to be framed within issues of activity, passivity and the male body as it is constructed through 'race'. The black male body has been represented in terms of extremes within Hollywood's symbolic - either radically sexualised, active, or passive and desexualised. The jokey but tough use of the 'buck' as a stereotype in Shaft or Action Jackson is in contrast to the various 'castrated', passive figures who operate as buddy to the white hero. Within the action cinema the white male body, in a move that combines these two extremes, is defined as both powerful and suffering. Whilst the body of the white hero is cut up and penetrated within the action narrative, he also survives. The assertion of a powerful body is framed by either images of suffering or a humour which is centred on the performance of gendered identity.

The two modes are brought together in the final fight between Vernon Wells/Bennett and Schwarzenegger/Matrix in Commando. The two men trade comic insults and sexualised

compliments on their performance, whilst slashing, stabbing and punching each other. In Rocky the hero's eye must be cut open before he can continue the final fight. In both First Blood and Rambo III Rambo repairs his own wounds, literally sewing himself up in one instance. The violence inflicted on the body is so extreme in Lock Up that critic Sheila Johnstone dubbed Stallone's character the 'Saint Sebastian of the maximum security cells'. These images serve as metonymic representations of castration, marking the limits within which the hero must operate. (23) The reference to Saint Sebastian points to the homoerotic associations of the images of bodily penetration that are so common in the action genre. This homoeroticism, which is consciously mobilised in Commando, for instance, can be further discussed in terms of a refusal, or a failure, of the role of the father.

Action Men, Fathers and Figures of Authority

In a recent interview Jean-Claude Van Damme, asked about his gay male following, muses that perhaps 'they miss affection and that's why they like to have a father figure'. He adds that his gay fans may also 'like the physique I have', at which point interviewer Jim McClellan, notes in an aside to the reader, 'it's a possibility' (The Face March 1992: 44). Given the knowing homoeroticism of recent Van Damme films, such as A.W.O.L. and Death Warrant, the production team at work seem well aware of the star's

appeal. The 'explanations' offered by Van Damme's highlight the fact that the cinematic hero is in the business of performing manliness not only at the level of physique, incorporating as well a desire to embody authority, to play the figure of the father. Yet it is precisely this performance, and the patriarchal authority it involves, that eludes the action hero, indeed is sometimes actively refused by him.

Action films here insistently work through a set of motifs related to sexuality and authority, motifs which are mapped onto both narrative structure and the body of the male hero. Linking the questions of the male hero's effectivity at work within a postmodern context, the embodiment of an excessive physical performance and an anxious narrative of male sexuality, is the 'crisis of the paternal signifier', to which Barbara Creed refers. Creed posits this failure as a way to contextualise the muscular hero as 'simulacra of an exaggerated masculinity, the original completely lost to sight' (Creed 1987: 65). It is ironic, in this context that Sarah Connor/Linda Hamilton sees the Schwarzenegger cyborg as the perfect father for her son in Terminator 2.

(24) His knowledge, physical power and the fact that he follows orders without question, having no desires of his own, mark him out from the series of inadequate humans with which we learn she has been involved. (In a different generic context, the failure to produce commodities within

the world of finance is linked to both a failure of masculinity, and a failed relationship to the father for the heroes of both Wall Street (Oliver Stone, 1987) and Pretty Woman (Gary Marshall, 1990)). The problem of the paternal position haunts the action narrative with its corrupt and untrustworthy figures of authority.

The psychoanalytic notion of homeovestism, which is defined as 'a perverse behaviour involving wearing clothes of the same sex' proves useful in this context (Zavitzianos 1977: 489). Referring to various case histories, Zavitzianos describes how the use of garments associated with paternal authority, and most particularly uniforms associated with sports and the military, provides a way to stabilise body image, to relieve anxiety and to raise self-esteem. Of course Zavitzianos, in an all too familiar clinical tone, tells us that with treatment 'the homeovestite may evolve from a homosexual object to a heterosexual one'. It is indicative of the uncertainty at stake here that it is precisely at such points, when the boundaries between different categories become blurred - as in the performance of an exaggerated version of a socially expected identity - that a reassuring talk of 'improvement' emerges. The value of this concept is that the paraphernalia of masculine uniforms and identities, which are often taken as 'normal' and 'natural' is, as much as any other form of behaviour,

seen as part of a fantasy structure which is invented, in which the terms of the natural have little purchase.

A less pathologising version of this notion is to be found in Lacan's concept of 'male parade', in which the accoutrements of phallic power, the finery of authority, belies the very lack that it displays. (25) The muscular male body can be seen to function as a powerful symbol of both desire and lack. Here heroism functions as an element of costume. Within the narratives which I have discussed the authoritative position of the father lacks credibility in various ways. This lack of credibility is part of a denaturalisation of masculinity and its relation to power. Within the action cinema of the 1980s, anxieties to do with difference and sexuality increasingly seem to be worked out over the body of the male hero - an economy in which the woman has little space or function.

In Die Hard 2 Holly McClane/Bonnie Bedelia is literally suspended in the air until the final minutes of the film, trapped in a stranded plane which circles the airport where the action takes place. Whilst it is played out on a huge stage, McClane's despairing drama is also a small drama, a family romance. Both Die Hard and Die Hard 2 draw to a close with McClane searching for his wife amongst the debris, covered in blood and crying out her name, seeming like nothing so much as a child. Indeed while Holly

McClane provides the term which holds the narrative together (since neither the job of cop nor patriotism provide the hero's motivation) she and John McClane are rarely together, with the moment of reunion constantly postponed. Only once, in the first film, do we see the family together, with McClane as a father - glimpsed as an image, a framed photograph in Holly's office, which she has turned face down in disgust.

Fatherhood is an important theme within many films of the 1980s in comedies such as Three Men and A Baby, Parenthood, Kindergarten Cop and Look Whose Talking. The opening sequences of Backdraft feature Alec Baldwin's character as a child who looks on as his fireman father is blown up. This loss leaves brother Kurt Russell to face the impossible task of filling the paternal shoes, though he ultimately dies, like his father, 'in the line of duty'. This example indicates something of the terms of the action cinema's involvement with themes of fatherhood and authority. In the Lethal Weapon films, it is significantly the black family that provides a point of security and paternal authority, with Danny Glover's fatherly stability clearly distinguished from the unsettled, hysterical, persona that Mel Gibson adopts in the film. In part this designation of the black buddy as father figure is in line with the ways in which black characters, cast in a subordinate role, frequently offer a point of security for

the white male hero - functioning as the reliable friend, or the good informant. However, in terms of the complex history of black representation in Hollywood, referred to in chapter two, the casting of the black hero as a fatherly figure also provides a way to avoid the authoritarian connotations which accompany the white hero when he is cast in that role. That is, to assign symbolic power, which is associated with the position of the father, to the black hero who emerges from a stereotypically passive history of representation, sidesteps an evident failure to make that paternal position work in relation to the white hero.

A disturbing assertion of fatherly authority does take place in The Last Boy Scout, a film which presents us with a white, suburban family in crisis, upon which Bruce Willis manages to impose some kind of order, ultimately getting his sassy daughter to show some respect and call him 'Sir'. The film itself is populated with failed figures of authority. In an astonishing opening sequence Billy Cole, a black football player told he must win at any cost, guns down opposing players before blowing his own brains out on a rain-sodden field. This sequence brings out the destructive effects of a pressure to succeed. Developed in the film through the character of ex-player Jimmy Dix/Damon Wayans, this sequence dramatises the destruction of the body resulting from the commercial exploitation of male

flesh. Professional sport is offered as both an arena for success and a site of failure.

Postmodernity can be taken to signal significant redefinitions of work and the masculine identity that it proposes. This helps us to situate and historicise the shifts in Hollywood's representation of the male hero. Andy Medhurst has characterised postmodernism as the heterosexual version of camp, a discourse in which both the play of multiple identities and acts of appropriation are fundamental. Sincerity, says Medhurst, is 'the ultimate swearword in the camp vocabulary' since while it 'implies truth; camp knows that life is composed of different types of lie' (Medhurst 1990: 19). To say, for example, that the enactments of masculinity seen in the action cinema seem like nothing so much as a series of exercises in male drag raises a question of sincerity, since it is the awareness of performance that distinguishes the masquerade from sociological conceptions of social roles. Yet whose awareness are we speaking about - the producers, the stars, the audience? When Rae Dawn Chong, watching Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bill Duke fight it out in Commando, sighs 'I don't believe this macho bullshit', who is she speaking to, or for?

Conclusion

There are a whole range of experiences and identities -

those of lesbian and gay audiences, of black and Asian audiences, of all the margins that make up the centre - that are rarely addressed directly by the Hollywood cinema in the way that those of white men seem to be. Yet the enactment of a drama of power and powerlessness, a drama which has a special resonance for marginalised groups, is intrinsic to the anxieties about masculine identity and authority that are embodied in the figure of the struggling white hero. The problems of authority which surround this figure have had an impact on the representation of black ^eheros and action heroines within recent action cinema. Indeed, it is the terms of this physical drama, of power and powerlessness, that has been carried over through the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s in the production of the muscular action heroine who is discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SEVEN: ACTION HEROINES IN THE AMERICAN CINEMA OF THE 1980s AND 1990s: THE LIMITS OF 'MUSCULINITY'

Introduction

It is possible to see the centrality of action heroines in recent Hollywood film as posing a challenge to women's social role, and to her representation within the cinema's symbolic order. This is the terrain over which a developing debate is currently being conducted within feminist film criticism as to the significance of the action heroine. Cinematic images of women who wield guns, and who take control of cars, computers and the other technologies that have symbolised both power and freedom within Hollywood's world, mobilise a symbolically transgressive iconography. At the most fundamental level, images of the active heroine disrupt the conventional notion that women either are, or should be, represented exclusively through the codes of femininity.

Suggestions that the action heroine is 'really a man', views addressed further below, stem from this assumption and represent an attempt to secure the logic of a gendered binary in which the terms 'male' and 'masculine', 'female' and 'feminine' are locked together. As my initial discussion of action heroines in the 1970s has indicated, the female protagonists of contemporary action films emerge from existing cinematic and literary traditions. However, the action heroine has also, in the last twenty years,

undergone a significant redefinition in American films. Thus, although she is not a product solely of the 1980s, there is a specificity to the appearance of recent action heroines. I characterised this in chapter one in terms of the heroine's move from her position as a subsidiary character within the action narrative, to the central role of action heroine, a figure who commands the narrative. A more specific phenomenon associated with recent American cinema is the appearance of a muscular action heroine, a figure who is discussed below in relation to the growth of women's involvement in bodybuilding as a sport and what this means for the development of shifting, 'masculine' identities for women.

Physical limitations and fantastic resolutions

Frantz Fanon's analysis of the symbolic and actual limits imposed by colonialism, cited in chapter six, provided a useful perspective through which to think about the operation of class and race within the muscular fantasies of empowerment that structure the action cinema. Fanon's work also makes clear the extent to which colonial discourse positions its subject within a sexualised rhetoric. Kobena Mercer has made the salient point that discussion of stereotypical representations of blackness-as-passivity in terms of the figure of 'castration', operates to once more recentre sexuality (which is fantasised as either excessive or absent) as the trope

through which blackness can most usefully be spoken about and understood. (1) In criticism, as in aesthetic practice, these stereotypes cannot be simply sidestepped - this much is evident from the action films, such as Shaft and Predator 2, discussed in chapter two.

The incorporation and working through of such stereotypes, within both contemporary criticism and film texts, makes clear the extent to which the constitution of the body as sexed and as gendered intersects with its constitution as a subject of class and racial discourse. The fantasies of muscular physical power that Fanon speaks of - expressed in dreams of jumping, running, swimming and climbing - are also bound into images of a masculine (though not, necessarily, male) strength, that is constructed as both an expression of freedom and a form of protection. Thus he suggests that 'the native's muscles are always tensed' (Fanon 1985: 41). These images, which speak of both bodily invincibility and vulnerability, accord with the kinds of operation through which the male body is constructed in the action cinema.

Metaphors of constriction and freedom, which draw from the actual limits through which lives are lived, have also been central to women's fiction. Such metaphors have been strategically mobilised by feminist writers. Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior works through such an

opposition in her fantastic portraits of Chinese-American womanhood thus

When we Chinese girls listened to the adults' talking-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen. Even if she had to rage across all China, a swordswoman got even with anybody who hurt her family. Perhaps women were once so dangerous that they had to have their feet bound (Kingston 1977: 25).

Here images of a fabulous power and freedom are defined against images of extreme constriction. And whilst Kingston clearly refers here to a female experience, and to male experience in her later China Men, her work effectively blurs the boundaries between categories of masculinity and femininity. (2) This is a literature concerned with the history and experience of limitation and constriction as it produces gendered identities.

Both oppression and fantasised escape are, however imaginary they may be, in effect inscribed over the body. In this sense the controversial film Thelma and Louise can be taken as a narrative of criminal women, centred on heroines who seemingly delight in their transgression of both the law and of the constraints within which they have lived their lives. The film enacts a drama about the transgression of limits - the opening up of the American landscape of the road invokes, for example, a pioneer rhetoric. The equally controversial Basic Instinct (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) orchestrates a rather different narrative of sexual investigation. The female protagonist, Catherine

Tramell/Sharon Stone, is both an aggressively sexual woman and a serial killer - a woman who transgresses both the law and conventions of female behaviour. This chapter addresses some of the issues which are posed by such films, as well as the debates which have framed their reception. What is the significance of the appearance of the female action heroine in the mainstream of Hollywood cinema production? How does this figure relate to the established Hollywood codes for representing both authority, and the populist hero's refusal of that authority? Debates concerning the political status of the active/action heroine are explored specifically in relation to Thelma and Louise and Basic Instinct. Following on from the question of 'masculinisation', raised within feminist evaluations of the action heroine, the impact of women's involvement in bodybuilding is then considered in terms of the transgression of bodily limits.

Sexuality, Feminism and Film: The Controversy over 'Thelma and Louise' and 'Basic Instinct'

'This film is a con'. Thus ran the opening of Spare Rib's review of Ridley Scott's Alien on its initial release in 1979. With the exception of this single film, when feminist writers addressed the action cinema at all during the 1980s, it was to dismiss the genre as macho and reactionary in familiar terms. However, the emergence of a series of diverse action-based films centred on female

protagonists has begun to generate a debate as to the political status of these films and their heroines. Thelma and Louise, a road movie also directed by Ridley Scott, was a hit during the summer of 1991, both in America and in European countries such as Britain and France. (3) The success of the film generated a series of articles, reviews and other commentaries which diversely praised, expressed concern or fascination at its 'gun-toting' heroines. Some saw Thelma and Louise as a feminist reworking of a male genre, the road movie, with women taking the place of the male buddies familiar to viewers of popular Hollywood cinema. For others the film represented an interrogation of male myths about female sexuality, an admirable commentary on rape and sexual violence.

As already mentioned, Thelma and Louise has also been appropriated by some women as a 'lesbian film'. Elsewhere Thelma and Louise has been characterised as a betrayal, a narrative that cannot follow through on its own logic. Far from being about empowering women, in this view the image of women-with-guns is considered to be one which renders the protagonists symbolically male. Whatever view we take, Thelma and Louise and associated female heroines have generated, at the beginning of the 1990s, an academic and journalistic debate analogous to that sparked by the muscular male stars of the 1980s. (4) The film was also consumed in an historical moment marked by the public

reemergence of familiar questions to do with sexuality, violence and relations of power between men and women, in the publicity surrounding the nomination of judge Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court and the Kennedy rape case in the United States. (5)

Thelma and Louise follows the adventures of two white southern women in the United States who take off for a weekend of fun and end up in flight from the law. After an attempted rape leads to a fatal shooting and flight from the police, the theft of Louise's savings leads Thelma to armed robbery. With its outlaw heroines pushed beyond the point of no return, Thelma and Louise takes its place with a group of recent films that put female protagonists at the centre of those action-based genres often reserved for men. A series of talked-about film performances from a variety of action sub-genres, all invoked the figure of the independent woman as heroine. Whilst films such as Aliens and The Silence of the Lambs, and the performances of their female stars have caused critical interest, an attendant suspicion can be detected that this type of role, indeed the appearance of women in the action cinema at all, is somehow inappropriate. (6)

Critical responses are never univocal, of course, and feminist critics have responded to these films with various combinations of pleasure and disgust, enthusiasm and

suspicion. These films, it seems, whilst praised and enjoyed for their centring of women, are for some potentially tainted by exploitation. Such a sense of critical unease is worth exploring further. For if action films centred on men have drawn condemnation for their supposed endorsement of a hyper-masculinity, how can the negative reaction to the emergence of female action heroines be contextualised and understood? I will argue that the films themselves may well prove easier to understand when placed within the context of the popular cinema, and the tradition of the American action film in particular, rather than in the context of a tradition of feminist filmmaking against which they are sometimes judged and, inevitably, found wanting.

Laura Mulvey concluded her well-known polemic essay of the 1970s, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', with the suggestion that women would have little or nothing to mourn in the passing of the Hollywood cinema (1989: 26). While recognising that the popular cinema of today is, in many ways, different from the popular cinema that Mulvey addresses, I want to raise a set of questions about the pleasure that both female and feminist spectators do take from mainstream cinema, pleasures which are not necessarily dictated by any rules of same-sex identification or by heterosexual understandings of desire. (7) The best way to express this might be in terms of a seeming contradiction

between what 'we' know and what 'we' enjoy, since the kinds of fantasy investments at work in the pleasures taken from the cinema cannot be controlled by conscious political positions in the way that some criticism seems to imply.

(8)

A tension between the project of legitimating women's pleasures and the desire to assess representations politically informs feminist approaches to popular culture. It is ironic then that a critical disapproval of the 1980's and 1990's action heroine, may stem in part from a feminist cultural criticism which has, in seeking to legitimise various pleasures and pastimes, classified popular forms and genres into male and female. The notion that some forms of activity and entertainment are more appropriate to men and some to women, that some genres can be called 'masculine' whilst others are labelled 'feminine' has a long history. Such a notion has its roots in common sense understandings of appropriate male and female behaviour as well as in the categories set up by those who produce images and fictions - such as the 'woman's film'. Ironically a designation of 'inappropriate' images derived from a feminist critical tradition, coincides here with a more conventional sense of feminine decorum, of knowing one's place within a gendered hierarchy. As much as anything, this critical trajectory reveals the operation within feminist criticism of a class-based, high-cultural,

attitude towards the popular cinema. This is an important point since, as discussed in previous chapters, class is a central term in the narratives of the action cinema.

Thelma and Louise charts the development of its two heroines as they move from the routines and confinement of everyday life to the freedom of the open road. In the process they move from the restrictions of the supposedly female space of the home to the freedom of the supposedly male space that is the great outdoors. The martial arts film China O'Brien also follows this trajectory, with China/Cynthia Rothrock resigning her job as a city police officer to return to her home town, where she ultimately becomes sheriff. A montage sequence shows her driving through the countryside in an open-top car, images of her face in close-up intercut with her surroundings. Whilst there is nothing particularly unusual in this cinematically speaking, Rothrock here occupies the role of a 'figure in a landscape', the phrase Mulvey used to describe the narrative control assigned to the male protagonist (Mulvey 1989: 20). The film seems to coyly acknowledge this shift, including a shot of a male gas-pump attendant, his chest exposed and hair blowing in the wind. The construction of this secondary male figure as spectacle provides a counterpoint to China's position as a dominating figure within the film. The road comes to signal a certain mythicised freedom.

At the outset of Thelma and Louise Thelma/Geena Davies is a shy, childlike woman, playing the role of meek housewife to husband Darryl/Christopher McDonald's macho self-centredness. Louise/Susan Sarandon is a waitress, capable and in control, balancing the demands of customers and workmates. The two set off for the weekend, Thelma's inability to make decisions resulting in a jokey sequence in which she packs almost everything she owns. This confusion is intercut with the neatness of Louise's apartment, everything cleaned and in its place. These images conjure up two extremes: an inability to cope, set against a calm efficiency. We can recall here that the male buddy scenario generally involves a pairing of opposites. These comic extremes in turn set up the terms within which these characters will change and develop through the course of the narrative. I have already spoken of the ways in which a rites of passage narrative is a key feature of the Vietnam narrative, in which the (white) hero 'finds himself' in the other space of Vietnam. These narratives build on a tradition of imperialist fictions within film and literature, in which Asia and Africa are constituted as exotic spaces for adventure. This structure is seen most explicitly in Platoon and is parodically, if rather viciously, drawn on in the 'Asia' of Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. (9) The heroine of women's fiction is centred in a rather different rites of passage

narrative, though one which nonetheless represents a coming to knowledge.

Maria La Place discusses the operation of such a narrative trajectory in many women's novels and stories which

centre on the heroine's process of self-discovery, on her progression from ignorance about herself (and about the world in general) to knowledge and some kind of strength (in Gledhill (ed) 1987: 152).

Specifically referring to the 1940s novel and film Now Voyager, La Place outlines the extent to which this transformation is both signalled and partly achieved through changes in the heroine's appearance - weight loss, new clothes, hairstyle and so on. (10) This transformation is reminiscent of the narratives constructed around the male bodybuilder, whose physical transformation signals his changed status in the world. The rite of passage narrative that situates women in relation to health or body culture, also defines the heroine's transformation through the body. Such a transformation is enacted over the protagonists of Thelma and Louise, with their changing appearance described by Kathleen Murphy as a literal shedding of skin when, in the final moments of the film:

the Polaroid of two smiling girls on vacation that Louise shot so many miles ago blows away in the wind, as insubstantial as a snake's outgrown skin (Murphy 1991: 29).

The closing credits continue this theme featuring a series of images of the two women, taken from different points in the narrative, which trace their transformation.

There is though a further sense in which the film's drama is enacted over the bodies of the two heroines. A drunken sexual assault on Thelma propels the two women on the road. Initially it is Louise who takes control, who rebukes and then shoots Harlan dead. Thelma's response is hysteria. 'What kind of world are you living in?' cries Louise on hearing Thelma's suggestion that they hand themselves over to the police. Later, when Louise's life savings have been stolen by JD/Brad Pitt, a young man Thelma has picked up, it is Thelma who begins to take charge. She robs a convenience store, a performance we see through flickering images, filmed by the store's surveillance video, as they are replayed to an astounded Darryl by the police. By the end of the film both Thelma and Louise are armed, literally with a gun stolen from a state trooper, and metaphorically with a powerful sense of self and of the impossibility of a return to their earlier lives. They decide to head to Mexico since, as Thelma puts it "Something's crossed over in me. I can't go back - I just couldn't live". Through these later scenes, the women are no longer just running, but enjoying the journey. The film offers a series of spectacular images, visual echoes of the women's changed perception. They destroy a tanker, after its driver, who has plagued them at various points along the road, has refused to apologise for his behaviour. The truck explodes in a mass of flame. Driving through the desert landscape at night, their car is lit up from within - a surreal

beacon. In this quiet moment they contemplate the night sky. Exhilarating and frustrating, the notorious final image of the film has the two women driving off a precipice rather than give themselves up.

The narrative of transformation which structures Thelma and Louise is analogous to the developments in Linda Hamilton's character, Sarah Connor, in The Terminator. Like Louise, Sarah begins the film as a harassed waitress. Told by her lover and protector, Kyle Reese/Michael Biehn, that she is destined to become a legend to the rebels of a future society, she moans that she can't even balance a check book. By the end of the film she has acquired military discipline, becoming self-sufficient. The militaristic iconography is continued in the sequel, Terminator 2, extended and more literally embodied through Hamilton's muscular frame. A turning point for Sarah Connor in The Terminator comes when Kyle is wounded and she must take control. At the very moment that he is giving up the fight, she screams at him to move. Addressing him as 'Soldier', she takes up the role of a commanding officer who harangues a tired platoon in order to save them, a role familiar from Hollywood war films. It is after this proof of her transformation, and Kyle's death which follows soon after, that Sarah finally terminates the Terminator. Kyle must die since, like the male hero, it seems that the action heroine cannot be in control of an adult sexuality.

At the beginning of Aliens Ripley refuses the offer to accompany the military on an Alien-hunting mission, telling company man Carter Burke that she is 'not a soldier'. She finally agrees to accompany the military platoon as an observer. Once there however, despite her protestations, Ripley effectively takes control from the inexperienced military leader - like Sarah Connor she has been transformed into a soldier.

It is perhaps the centrality of images of women with guns in the films I have referred to thus far that has caused the most concern amongst feminist critics. The phallic woman, that characters like Sarah Connor and Ripley represent, can seem a male ruse, and a film like Thelma and Louise as 'little more than a masculine revenge fantasy' whose 'effect is perversely to reinforce the message that women cannot win'. (11) We can see here the obverse of that critical move by which the suffering of the hero has been read as a testament to his, and consequently patriarchy's invincibility. The struggles of the female protagonist seem only to reinforce her passivity and secure her ultimate failure. Within this perspective disruptive narrative or representational elements function as little more than precursors to their ultimate hegemonic incorporation. Hence these images are taken to represent a double betrayal, holding out a promise that can never be fulfilled ('This film is a con').

Situating Thelma and Louise within the traditions of popular cinema might allow us to see it differently. Within many Hollywood action narratives, access to technologies such as cars and guns (traditional symbols of power) represents a means of empowerment. These technologies are also intimately bound up with images of the masculine. The female protagonists of the films discussed above operate within an image-world in which questions of gender identity are played out through the masculinisation of the female body. Within Thelma and Louise the possession of guns and the possession of self are inextricably linked through the dilemmas that the film poses about freedom and self-respect. Drawing from representations of male self-sufficiency, the film traces the women's increasing ability to 'handle themselves', a development partly expressed through their ability to handle guns. Initially Thelma can barely bring herself to handle her gun, a gift from husband Darryl - picking it up with an expression of distaste. As the narrative progresses, she acquires both physical coordination, which denotes self-possession, and the ability to shoot straight. When the two women destroy the tanker, they happily compliment each other on their skills.

Thelma and Louise is for the most part comic in tone.

Despite all the gunplay, the women only once shoot anybody: the killing which sends them on the run. When Louise

threatens Harlin it is to protect Thelma from rape. When she shoots him it is in response to his contemptuous language. This is a tense and emotional scene, one which draws on a history of representation in which women kill for revenge. (12) In order to keep the heroines as sympathetic figures they cannot be constructed as wantonly violent, and there is no final shootout. The carefully contained criminality represented in the figures of Thelma and Louise can be contrasted to the figure of Catherine Tramell in Basic Instinct, an intensely controversial film which provoked protests in the United States against its 'negative' representation of a 'lesbian' heroine. Basic Instinct is, by contrast to Thelma and Louise, a thriller, and the heroine is a monstrous but fascinating figure (an active heroine rather than an action heroine). We are positioned with an equally monstrous detective hero, Nick, played by Michael Douglas, who investigates a series of murders associated with Tramell.

Because Tramell is the villain her transgressions can be of quite a different order to the women who learn about themselves, and each other, on the road in Thelma and Louise. The most obvious antecedent for both the narrative and characterisation that Basic Instinct mobilises, as well as critical models for thinking about its articulation of sexuality, is film noir of the 1940s. Several critics have pointed to the power and potency of the image of the deadly

femme fatale found in these films. Such critical models often direct our attention not only to the ideological implications of a narrative progression, in which the strong woman inevitably dies or is punished, but to the lasting impression that her figure leaves us with. (13)

Thus Janey Place remarks that film noir is

one of the few periods of film in which women are active, not static symbols, are intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness, from their sexuality (Kaplan (ed) 1980: 35).

Here the femme fatale is seen to turn around the terms within which 'woman' is defined, so that both her power is constituted through the terms of sexuality.

Catherine Tramell is cast as a femme fatale, a deadly woman who uses her sexuality against men. She is a wealthy, sexually aggressive woman who becomes involved with various men who are destined to become characters in her books, and ultimately to be killed off once they have outlived their usefulness. More controversially, Catherine is cast as bisexual - or rather polymorphously perverse. Critics who attacked the portrayal of Catherine as a lesbian, tended to either ignore the fact that she spends a good part of the film sexually involved with men, or constructed this as a pathologising narrative in which she is 'cured' of her lesbianism. Whilst this is certainly what Douglas's character seems to believe within the film, as he brags about his sexual performance to Catherine's girlfriend, for

instance, there is also a clear sense in which the audience cannot fully accept this version of events. Indeed a sustained narrative tension stems from the ambiguity which surrounds ^{Stone/}Tramell's attitude to Douglas^{Nick}, particularly an uncertainty as to whether or not he will become her next victim. In the publicity poster from which Sharon Stone stares out at the viewer, her mouth (and hence her expression) remains hidden, rendering her a mysterious figure. The final image of the film itself echoes this uncertainty. Filling the frame is the murder weapon, an ice pick, which is hidden beneath the bed that Tramell shares with Nick/Douglas. Such an ambiguity may indicate that the 'active' heroine who is associated with the figure of the femme fatale as Place defines her, is quite distinct from the action heroine, whose motivation is rarely ambiguous. In thinking about recent action cinema we need to pay attention not only to the ambiguity which is at stake in the gendered identity of the active heroine, but the redefinition of the sexed body that is worked out over the muscular female body of the action heroine.

Women, Bodybuilding and Body Culture

Women are increasingly involved in bodybuilding as a competitive sport. It is now also a regular feature of the exercise programmes recommended in women's magazines, no longer perceived, as it once was, as a marginal activity associated with only a few 'fanatical' sportswomen. This

involvement has led to the rapid growth of the bodybuilding industry and, as Laurie Schulze points out, shifts in the 'ideal' female body - as it is offered to women through fashion magazines, models, beauty culture and so on. The soft curves presented as defining the ideal female form in the 1950s, has shifted to an emphasis on muscle tone in images of the 1980s and early 1990s. At the same time, of course, the market for men's cosmetics has expanded, championed by several successful men's style magazines.

(14) Some bodybuilding magazines now extend their promise-cum-challenge to 'build yourself a better body', to women as well as men. Both beauty and body culture have responded then, though perhaps in contradictory ways, to the successes of the women's movement, most particularly in the repeated invocation within advertising of the figure of the (sexually and financially) independent woman. The advent of the female bodybuilder represents a distinct part of this response.

Schulze argues that the female bodybuilder 'threatens not only current socially constructed definitions of femininity and masculinity, but the system of sexual difference itself' (Gaines and Herzog (eds) 1990: 59). Bodybuilding that is, makes explicit the extent to which both sex and gender constitute the body within culture, problematising the boundaries of what constitutes drag (see Butler 1991, Epstein and Straub (eds) 1991). Yet Schulze is also

concerned to demonstrate that the threat posed by the female bodybuilder is almost instantly allayed within dominant culture. Her analysis thus seeks to show how the 'domestication of a potential challenge to dominant definitions of a feminine body is accomplished' (Gaines and Herzog (eds) 1991: 61). Despite this assertion of failed potential, the final pages of Schulze's essay are tentatively given over to thinking about the consumption of these images by specific audiences and within the subculture of female bodybuilding itself. Here bodybuilding is admitted as a space where the meanings attached to the sexed body are uncertain and shifting.

Given the extent to which 'woman' has been equated with nature the muscular female body raises a different, if related, set of issues than those touched on in my discussion of the muscular male hero. Whilst the muscleman produces himself as an exaggerated version of what is conventionally taken to be masculine, the female bodybuilder takes on supposedly 'masculine' characteristics. Muscles as a signifier of manual labour become appropriated for the decoration of the female body. Both figures draw attention to and redefine a bodily understanding of gendered identity.

Some of the rich connotative qualities of the muscular female body are brought out by Robert Mapplethorpe in his

photographs of bodybuilder Lisa Lyons Lady: Lisa Lyons. Published in 1983, Mapplethorpe's images were the result of a sustained collaboration between the two. The photographs play with the conventional associations of the sexed body. They feature the clash of a range of 'masculine' and 'feminine' connotations, which stem from not only the presentation of the body as substance, but the ways in which it is decorated, posed and presented to the world. 'Feminine' fabrics such as lace are juxtaposed with the hard 'masculine' texture of Lyons' muscular body. At other points Lyons is dressed in fetishistic garb which is both qualified and further sexualised by her physique. This contrast is also expressed through the nudes, many of which echo classical poses associated almost exclusively with the male nude. One image focuses on a fragment on Lyons' body, isolating her arm, which is flexed to reveal biceps, and one breast. Other images frame her striking muscular poses against a natural landscape, playing off the associations of woman-as-nature against these images of woman-in-nature. Far from rendering her manly through her muscularity, these photographs emphasise both the hardness of female muscles and the softer flesh of the breasts.

Women's participation in health culture, bodybuilding in particular, as opposed to beauty culture, sets unconventional (for women) standards of attainment, and consequently has a series of implications for ideals of

both femininity and masculinity. If the muscles of the male star or bodybuilder can seem either parodic or dysfunctional, then the muscles of the female bodybuilder only serve to emphasise the arbitrary qualities of these symbols of manual labour and of physical power. Conversely, the hardness of the muscles goes against a history of representation - visual and verbal - in which the female body is imagined as soft and curvaceous. The sport of bodybuilding is thus the arena for yet another manifestation of a contradiction between the naturalised and the manufactured body, specifically in debates about what a female bodybuilder should look like, and how she should be judged. In the cinema the muscular physique of Linda Hamilton as Sarah Connor in Terminator 2 offers a distinctive visualisation of the heroine. Both her physique and her tough performance, in addition to an array of weaponry, makes her a formidable figure. By way of contrast to her role in the earlier film, in which she needs to be taught by the male characters how to function heroically, she is determined to be prepared for her second battle with the Terminator. We first see her working out in a 'gym' she has improvised from the bedstead in the mental institution where she has been incarcerated following the events of the first film. This persona juxtaposes traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics - she is a butch-femme. (15)

I want to discuss here the implications of the iconographic transgression at stake in recent characterisations of the action heroine generally, and the muscular female body specifically. A discussion of three quite different films may help to follow up some of these points. In Getting Physical (Steven H Sterne, 1984), a television film dealing with female bodybuilding (in which Lisa Lyons herself appears) we see the protagonist discover a sense of self through bodybuilding. The semi-documentary Pumping Iron II: The Women follows a female bodybuilder's contest. It has received considerable commentary from feminist critics. Perfect casts Jamie Lee Curtis as an aerobics instructor in a California health club. Though none of these three films is an action narrative, all deal with women's position within health and body culture, and all are taken from the same moment, the mid-1980s, in which the muscular male star was becoming a significant box-office phenomenon.

In Getting Physical we see women's bodybuilding through the eyes of a new recruit to the sport. The film is, on some levels, a classic makeover story in which the female protagonist, initially lacking any confidence or motivation becomes, through physical change, a confident individual who is accepted by her family, her boyfriend and the world in general, as she poses on the stage of a bodybuilding contest. Kendal comes to bodybuilding by accident, has to be persuaded into it. In the film's first sequence we see

her rushing to an audition for an acting role. She is clumsy and over-weight, working in a tedious office job. Kendal smokes, eats to 'excess' without any real enjoyment and does not feel comfortable with her family. Her father complains that she can't 'get serious' about anything. After she is unable to defend herself from being assaulted in a carpark Kendal goes to the police station where she meets Mickey, the man who becomes her boyfriend. He suggests she takes self-defence classes, giving her the address of a local gym.

On arrival at the gym Kendal is introduced to the spectacular world of bodybuilding. We see the muscular bodies of women working out from Kendal's point of view. Close-ups of flexing legs and arms are intercut with her admiring face. For the first time (it is implied) she aspires to something, determining to look the same.

Getting Physical traces Kendal's increasing commitment to bodybuilding which ultimately leads to her decision to leave her office job and to abandon her vague aspirations to act. Instead she enters a bodybuilding contest as a way to succeed on a public stage. Taken under the wing of a professional bodybuilder, Nadine/Sandahl Bergman, and her husband/trainer, Kendal leaves home in order to train. Kendal's bodybuilding is opposed by both her boyfriend and her father, who see it as disturbing and unfeminine.

Finally though they both come round, applauding her performance in the contest with which the film ends.

Whilst not a particularly sophisticated drama, Getting Physical poses in new terms a basic narrative that has long been a staple of women's and teenage girl's magazines - that of acquiring confidence, independence and social/familial acceptance. The makeover is expressed through images of physical strength, which clash with a traditionally 'feminine' passivity. In the opening sequences of the film such passivity is pathologised, with Kendal presented as listless and disinterested in life. The drive for physical perfection seen in Perfect is, by way of contrast, constructed as pathetic and humiliating. The world of health culture is depicted through the cynical eyes of Adam Lawrence/John Travolta, a Rolling Stone journalist. He is interested in another, 'serious' story and follows up a piece on California health culture only as a fall-back. Perfect deals with aerobics rather than bodybuilding. Though the film is, like Getting Physical, set in a gym, the connotations of aerobics emerge here as remarkably different from those of bodybuilding. Lawrence's story which is centred on health clubs as the 'single bars of the 1980s', is to run under the title 'Looking For Mr Goodbody'. Lawrence pretends to Jessie Wilson/Jamie Lee Curtis that he is writing an in-depth piece on the club, whilst actually penning an exploitative

article which mocks both the women and the men who attend the club. Their concern with the body is pathologised whilst, at the same time, Sally and Linda, two of the film's female health-club goers, are found physically wanting, photographed in 'unflattering' angles and lighting.

Ironically the sexualised display of the body is one of the film's key pleasures, and was central to the way in which it was marketed. Schulze criticises Getting Physical for its construction of Kendal's bodybuilding as a way to 'facilitate (heterosexual) romance', despite the fact that at one point in the narrative her refusal to give up training causes her to break up with her boyfriend (Schulze 1986: 39). Further, the bodybuilding narrative of that film contrasts starkly with the obsessive reference to sexuality and the body that typifies Perfect, released at roughly the same time. Perhaps because of its newness, or because of the uncertainty that it seems to generate, the image of the female bodybuilder is not easily representable in terms of sexualised display.

Since it is concerned exclusively with competitive bodybuilding, Pumping Iron II: The Women takes on much more centrally the problems of definition that are necessarily an issue for the female bodybuilder. As various critics pointed out at the time of the film's release, its terrain

is in part that of the cultural definition of femininity with which feminism has also been concerned. Here though, as with Getting Physical, the film has been characterised as failing to do justice to the transgressive potential of the built female body. Thus Christine Holmlund argues that

Far from abolishing stereotypes based on visible difference, Pumping Iron II, and Pumping Iron as well, visibly position the body as spectacle, then sell it as big business. In both films, the threat of visible difference and the threat of the abolition of visible difference are contained and marketed - as flex appeal. (Holmlund 1989: 49).

The potential of the film lies for Holmlund in its rendering of the sexed body as artificial, self-created rather than natural. As with commentaries on the sexual politics of the muscular male stars, such an overlap between high theory and popular culture could only be a 'coincidence'. Jane Root's review picks out, for example, the moment at which:

the elderly and predominantly male judges get together to discuss the purpose of the event. Their allotted task for the evening? To "agree on a definition of femininity".

For Root this 'unselfconscious and unintentionally hilarious comment':

provides a neat example of the pleasures afforded by this documentary, which seems to have stumbled on some of the hottest issues around for feminism and cultural politics' (Monthly Film Bulletin November 1985: 346).

Root's suggestion that the filmmakers and participants in female bodybuilding have 'stumbled' on a knowledge forged within feminist cultural politics is indicative. Against this we might consider that both the debates with which

feminist cultural politics is engaged, and the particular forms of popular culture considered here, emerge from the same historical moment. This would involve criticism recognising its own historical location, noting that the concerns elaborated within the realm of theory might also be found, in different terms, in the popular.

For Holmlund Pumping Iron II is voyeuristic, commercial and shallow. In a particularly telling passage, she argues, in relation to Bev Francis, the woman with the most massively built body in the film, that:

the association of muscularity, masculinity, and lesbianism invokes these fears of a loss of love for spectators of both sexes, though in different ways. If heterosexual men see Bev as a lesbian, she is threatening: lesbians incarnate sexual indifference to men. If heterosexual women see Bev as a lesbian they must reject her: to like her would mean admitting that they might themselves be lesbian, which would in turn entail the abnegation of traditionally feminine powers and privileges (Holmlund 1989: 43).

Apart from the construction of the audience for the film as exclusively heterosexual, we can note here how the pleasure of looking at these bodies - what Root calls the film's 'uninviting subject matter' - is erased by a feminist analysis which takes on the role of looking at and pronouncing judgement on popular culture. Holmlund's analysis depends on a clear distinction between the interdependent categories of heterosexual and homosexual. Yet might not part of the pleasure of the film be the

dissolution of such rigid categories within the imaginary space of the cinema? (16)

Laurie Schulze, who initially refers to the deconstructive aspects of the female bodybuilder, produces a similar analysis in which this figure is complexly incorporated back into a patriarchal heterosexual mainstream due to an insistence on her femininity. Schulze argues that the female bodybuilder:

must be anchored to heterosexuality; if she is not, she may slip through the cracks in the hegemonic system into an oppositional sexuality that would be irrecoverable (Gaines and Herzog (eds) 1991: 61).

Yet, in terms of the problematising of borders and boundaries, it is precisely the femininity of the female bodybuilder that destabilises her relationship to the supposedly secure categories of sex, sexuality and gender. By existing across supposedly opposed categories, the female bodybuilder reveals the artifice of that opposition. Casting lesbianism as an irrecoverable, or even an oppositional, sexuality attempts instead to secure a binary logic. (17)

Judith Butler makes a similar point when she signals the ways in which a notion of homosexuality supports and structures, is in fact necessary to, heterosexuality (Butler 1991). Schulze finds in the interviews she conducts with lesbians on the subject of female

bodybuilding, a conservatism about gendered and sexed bodily identity. Schulze reports rather than analyses the responses she received, though she makes clear the extent to which the muscular-yet-feminine female body is found to be disturbing because it falls between conventional categories of sexed and gendered identity, categories which are as important to lesbian identities as they are to straight identities. (18)

'Musculinity' and the Action Heroine

In thinking about the contemporary action heroine it would be a mistake to rely exclusively on the critical models associated with the femme fatale which are useful in thinking about Basic Instinct, since the heroines of other successful films of this period, such as Silence of the Lambs and Aliens, as well as Fatal Beauty or the China O'Brien films discussed in chapter one, are neither outlaws nor criminal. Their behaviour - the extent to which they go against the rules - operates as a variant on that of the populist action hero who must break the law in order to secure some kind of justice in the world. Thus in the three Aliens films Ripley finds herself doing battle not only with the Alien, but with a conspiratorial company that ruthlessly disregards human life. In Silence of the Lambs trainee Clarice Starling is invited to participate in the FBI's investigation of serial killer 'Buffalo Bill' only to be systematically excluded from it. An early image frames

Starling at the FBI training centre, as the only woman in an elevator carriage full of men. Most of the group tower over her, whilst the pale blue of her sweat shirt contrasts to the red in which the men are dressed, emphasising her relative isolation. She ultimately aligns herself with a serial killer, Hannibal Lecter, who can provide her with clues as to the killer's identity and motivation, scraps of evidence withheld by Jack Crawford and his team. Finally it is Starling's perception that leads her to the killer's house - her quiet arrival intercut with Crawford and company bursting noisily into an empty house, armed to the teeth.

The position of the action heroine in relation to the institutions of the state is often as problematic as that of the hero, though this is necessarily represented in different ways. A key film in this respect is Kathryn Bigelow's Blue Steel, which stars Jamie Lee Curtis as a rookie New York police woman. Blue Steel is a complex psychological thriller which attempts to explore the role of women in the action cinema. The film both invokes and teases out the implications of the sexualised gloss that is often played out over the figure of the action heroine. Working through a sustained cinematic weapons fetish, Blue Steel follows the awkward institutional location of Curtis's character, Megan Turner. At three moments, spread through the course of the narrative, Turner is asked why

she became a cop. That this is insistently an issue is crucial to the rather ambiguous tone of the film, which has Turner play with the answers that it might be possible to give to this question: that she wanted to shoot people, or that she loves violence. Finally, she simply murmurs, 'him'. This last explanation is the most ambiguous - does 'him' refer to her father, with whom she is in conflict throughout the film, the serial killer Eugene with whom she is involved, or a more generalised 'he'? Yet an uncertainty also surrounds the 'joke' explanations that Turner gives. Her deadpan assertions that she joined the force for the violence are given in response to the different attitudes - contemptuous, incredulous, fearful or patronising - that the men she meets take towards her role. Questions of status and authority are further worked through in Turner's relationship to her father and her attitude to his violent treatment of her mother. Ultimately she arrests him, handcuffing him and dragging him to the car, though she cannot finally turn him in.

The films discussed above all work with a variety of types of femininity, defined and redefined through the body and through the invocation and transgression of the kinds of behaviour considered appropriate for women. In Alien, Sigourney Weaver's Ripley is defined against a series of other female types, such as Lambert, who is weak and hysterical and, at a more metaphoric level, the ship's

computer 'Mother'. Barbara Creed has discussed the ways in which the film works through monstrous images of femininity, in particular through the characterisation of the Alien (Creed 1986 and 1987). The spaceship, as a science-fiction microcosm of humanity, includes women within its world. The inclusion of women in both the civilian crew of the Nostromo in Alien and the military team of Aliens signals both the metaphoric status of the drama that they enact, and the fact that it is set in the future. Yet, despite her rank, the narrative makes certain that Ripley still be seen to struggle to establish her authority with Ash in Alien, a struggle that reprises an earlier scene, in which Parker and Brett drown out her words with steam. These hierarchical conflicts effectively position Ripley as an outsider action heroine. Such a marginality is crucial to the characterisation of the action hero within Hollywood cinema. Similarly, as the marines in Aliens emerge from their 'hyper-sleep', they are reassembled into a military team of which Ripley is clearly not a part. Although Ripley is initially separated from the 'grunts' and associated with the military command, her populist allegiance to the troops quickly becomes clear.

The military coding of Aliens redefines the premise of the original to some extent since, as with other sequels, it must deal with the fact that the audience may already be familiar with the source of the film's horror and threat.

At first Ripley is positioned on the top table with the Lieutenant who, as one of the soldiers puts it, 'think's he's too good to eat with the rest of the grunts'. The hostility in Aliens, between an experienced crew and an inexperienced and bureaucratic officer, is familiar from a range of war and action films. Whilst the military are in uniform and Burke, the company representative on the mission, is in civvies, Ripley's dress, with leather flying jacket and fatigues is iconographically somewhere between the two. Early on she tells Burke that she is 'not a soldier' but ^{she} ~~as~~ ultimately takes command. As with any populist hero, the turning point comes when the military team find themselves defenceless against an attack and the ineffectual lieutenant hesitates about pulling them out. Ripley seizes the controls of the armoured car from which they are monitoring the massacre, driving into the complex to rescue the troops.

When it is revealed that the company has betrayed them all, as in the first film, it is clear whose interests Ripley defends, and she gradually emerges as the 'natural leader' of the platoon. When most of the military have been either killed or lie unconscious, Ripley suggests that Corporal Hicks/Michael Biehn take command. At this point Burke gives away his company allegiance, and his contempt for the platoon by calling Hicks a 'grunt'. Ripley's incorporation into the military team can be contrasted to the isolation

of Goldberg's character in Fatal Beauty. Goldberg/Rizzoli is repeatedly attacked by both cop colleagues and villains, assailed with verbal insults and physical violence. The film offers no supportive team to back her up, so that Goldberg is isolated within both the film frame and the narrative. Which is to say, to be a team player involves being admitted onto the team in the first place.

Aliens also deploys the striking figure of Jenette Goldstein as Private Vasquez, a muscular woman with cropped hair. Gesturing at Ripley in an early scene, Vasquez asks a fellow soldier 'Who's Snow White?', establishing something of a distance between the two, though they ultimately find themselves on the same side. Butch but not boyish, Vasquez is an iconic tough action heroine. Since Vasquez is a team player, not an outsider, she alligns herself with Ripley against the company and the military authorities. On waking from hyper-sleep she immediately starts doing pull-ups in front of the screen, responding to a male colleague's question 'Ever been mistaken for a man?' with the reply 'No, have you?' before slapping the hands of her buddy within the unit. Vasquez enacts the female action persona of the 'ball-busting' woman. Leona/Maria Conchita Alonso in Predator 2 has a similar role, literally grabbing an annoying male's crotch. Later she asks him 'How are your balls?' to which he responds 'Fine - How are yours?'. All this posing and verbal horseplay dwells on,

and comically works over, the problems of the figure of the tough woman in the male team. In order to function effectively within the threatening, macho world of the action picture, the action heroine must be to an extent masculinised.

The masculinisation of the female body, which is effected visibly through her muscles, can be understood in terms of a notion of 'musculinity'. That is, some of the qualities associated with masculinity are written over the tough female body. 'Musculinity' indicates the way in which the signifiers of strength are not limited to male characters. These action heroines though, are still marked as women, despite the arguments advanced by some that figures like Ripley are merely men in drag.

In Terminator 2 Linda Hamilton's tough physique is played off against the strength-in-fluidity of the monstrous T1000 which pursues her and her son John. The T1000 can take on any form and imitate any voice, though 'he' spends most of the film cast as an LA cop. At times we see him turn into a mercurial liquid, reconstituting himself when damaged. His limbs can also be transformed into sharp metallic tools. I argued earlier that the T1000's fluid ability to transform his body constructs him as a feminised monster, in contrast to the solidity of Schwarzenegger as the protective cyborg, the good Terminator. The terror of the

T1000 lies partly in its ability to transform its body from fluidity to a sharp metallic hardness, as when it tortures Sarah Connor by stabbing her with an arm transformed into a blade. Whilst such images obviously draw on figures of penetration, they also bring up once more themes of the vulnerability and invulnerability of the body already discussed in relation to the male hero. The significance of this motif in relation to the action heroine is taken up below.

Power and Powerlessness: The Body of the Heroine

An inordinate amount of debate has been given over to the political implications of the final scenes of Alien in which Ripley, thinking she has destroyed the Alien, she undresses in preparation for sleep. Ripley's near-nakedness, her vulnerability in this sequence is not an insignificant narrative moment. However, this is not the definitive image of the film. Neither is it a moment only for the pleasure of male viewers as some critics have suggested. The sequence can also be understood in terms of the extreme images of bodily vulnerability and invulnerability that are mobilised in the action cinema. Action films operate in part to dramatise transgression - a transgression that may take the form of the breaking of official codes of the law as in Thelma and Louise. These codes can often be taken to stand in for symbolic codes of social behaviour.

Transgression is a term resonant for feminism, implying the crossing of boundaries and the breaking of taboos.

Feminist film studies has paid much attention, for example, to the figure of the femme fatale, a woman who destroys the hero, and ultimately herself, with her monstrous desires.

Crime cinema is concerned with the delineation of normality and perversion at the obvious level of narrative content.

But the cinema is also concerned to explore the exciting and often sexualised border that it thus calls into being, articulating the heroism of the gangster and his tragic demise, the sleaziness of law enforcement and the horrors of feeling trapped by the law. The establishment and transgression of limits is the stuff of Hollywood cinema rather than an occasional by-product. Thus, a politicised understanding of the image and of narrative content needs to be supplemented by a sense of the image at play within a narrative dynamic which produces the cinematic experience as sensuous, rather than simply cerebral.

In James Cameron's Aliens Ripley is again both a vulnerable and a powerful figure. The tension between power and powerlessness, which is that generated by the law, is also explored and exploited in action/science-fiction films such as RoboCop, Total Recall and Blade Runner which centre on men. (19) The body of the hero or heroine, though it may be damaged, represents almost the last certain territory of the action narrative. In RoboCop and Total Recall neither

the body nor the mind is certain, both being subject to state control within a science-fiction dystopia. In RoboCop the figure of the cyborg plays off the metallic shell of the hero with its seeming invulnerability, against the glimpses of human flesh and the memories of a human past maintained beneath. Total Recall situates Schwarzenegger's body ('Mr Universe') within a narrative in which his mind has been stolen - again the hero finds himself powerless, mentally manipulated by a ruthless government agency. Similar problems of identity afflict Murphy/RoboCop, who has flashbacks of his former life, images which seem to be taken from home video since they are transmitted to us through his mechanical 'eyes'. Such images draw on the generic currency of conspiratorial science-fiction. When all else fails, the body of the hero, and not his voice, or his capacity to make a rational argument, is the place of last resort. That the body of the hero is the sole narrative space that is safe, that even this space is constantly under attack, is a theme repeatedly returned to within the action cinema.

In Aliens Ripley is positioned as out of place in a future world of which she knows little (she has been in hyper-sleep for fifty-seven years). Feeling like a 'fifth wheel' amongst the military team, Ripley boosts her status with the grunts by offering to take on a manual task at which she is proficient, donning a kind of mechanical skin - the

loader, used to transport stores - which gives her a physical power that she is later to use in tackling the film's monstrous mother Alien. The sheer bulk of the loader gives Ripley physical stature. In this striking image the heroine directly enacts a fantasy of physical empowerment, one which is usually reserved for the hero. Her relative powerlessness, her physical vulnerability, is played with so that Weaver's femaleness additionally eroticises this fantasy of power through the transgression of gender boundaries. A much-reproduced publicity image of Weaver showed her clutching a child in one arm, weapon in another. In her confrontation with the alien the loader provides only partial protection as the monster extends its teeth inside its frame, snapping at Ripley's face.

The casting of women as the protagonists in the police film, the road movie, the science-fiction film and so on shifts and inflects the traditional vulnerability of the hero in such films. This is a set of genres, after all, in which the hero is constantly subject to physical violence. For women this physical vulnerability is easily mapped onto the sexualised violence of rape. The possibility of violent rape which threatens the action hero is generally only implied - though images of bodily penetration abound. Perhaps this serves to flesh out Ridley Scott's statement that Thelma and Louise is 'not about rape' but about 'choices and freedom'. (20) For a narrative centred on a

female protagonist, rape offers one powerful way to articulate issues of freedom and choice. These issues are the substance of the road movie, as much as is the conflict between the responsibilities of home and family on the one hand, the delights of adventures and same-sex friendship on the other. Similarly, the maternal bond that is invoked in films such as Aliens and Terminator 2 both strengthens and weakens the heroine in ways that draw on the complex history of 'woman' as a term within representation.

Conclusion

There are a range of determinants informing the production of the woman as action heroine in recent cinema. Her appearance can be seen to signal, amongst other factors, a response to feminism and the exhaustion of previous formulae. But as we have seen in relation to the problems which have surrounded the typecasting of Whoopi Goldberg as a black woman within Hollywood action pictures, images operate within cultural contexts which are crowded with competing images and stereotypes. The figure of the action hero is relentlessly pursued and punished, both mentally and physically. Beatings in back alleys and in boxing rings abound. The climactic moment of many action films is the final fight between the hero and an opponent who is physically stronger. The triumphal conquest over physical punishment is saturated with a different kind of coding when we are dealing with a heroine and the (almost always)

already sexualised female body on the screen. Drawing on codes of chivalry, male violence against women has typically functioned within the Hollywood cinema as a signifier of evil.

Feminism has proposed a rather different understanding of violence against women in relation to institutionalised male power, often expressed through metaphors of physical strength versus weakness. In thinking about women in the action film more specifically, we should consider that if women on the screen are excessively sexualised then so is the violence to which they are subject. This returns us to the frequent repetition of images and narratives associated with rape. The rape-revenge narrative is often used to provide a justification (since one is generally needed) for female violence in movies such as I Spit on Your Grave, Ms 45/Angel of Vengeance and the psychological thriller Mortal Thoughts (Alan Rudolph, 1991). Seen against such a history, for the action heroine as much as the action hero, the development of muscles as a sort of body armour signifies physical vulnerability as well as strength. (21)

CHAPTER EIGHT: KATHRYN BIGELOW AND THE CINEMA AS SPECTACLE

'Action movies have a capacity to be pure cinema, in that you can't recreate their kinetic, visual quality in any other medium'.

Kathryn Bigelow (1)

Introduction

In this chapter an analysis of three films by Kathryn Bigelow, Near Dark (1987), Blue Steel (1990) and Point Break (1991) serves to bring together some key themes of the action cinema addressed in this dissertation. I have already referred to Blue Steel at various points, a film whose 'gun-toting' heroine caused some controversy amongst feminist critics. Bigelow's work provides a useful point of reference for thinking about the visual aspects of the action cinema, since her work as a director is often described as 'painterly'. These three films work through a series of striking visual images. They also reveal an acute sense of the operation of genre, complexly drawing on and redefining the horror genre, the cop thriller and the buddy action movie.

'Near Dark' and the 'Uncanny'

In his essay on the uncanny, Freud comments on the distinctive operation of art and literature as a realm for the production and experience of uncanny effects. Comparing the space of fiction and fantasy to that of 'real life', he suggests that:

the realm of phantasy depends for its effect on the fact that its content is not submitted to reality-testing. The somewhat paradoxical result is that in the first place a great deal that is not uncanny in fiction would be so if it happened in real life; and in the second place that there are many more ways of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life (Freud 1919: 373. emphasis in original).

To extend the point, fiction, indeed art of all kinds, operates as a space for the play of fantasy, uncanny effects, comedy and extremes of emotion. We can further note that this space is not usefully judged by the same standards as 'reality' or experienced in the same way. In emphasising fantasy, I have argued against the production of a political criticism based on a too literal interpretation of images. One characteristic of narrative representations, found in both art and popular forms, is the revelation of perversity behind a supposed normality. Such revelations may be disorientating or relatively banal, simply observing the deceptive nature of appearances. From the ambiguity necessary to sustain suspense, to complex psychological narratives of doubled identities, this commonplace narrative device provides a way into thinking about the politics of representation in terms of the construction, and dissolution, of spaces for identification within the cinema.

Near Dark is not distinctive in the horror cinema in its portrayal of a perverse, cannibalistic 'family'. (2) The shock of such images involves a contrast between the cosy

connotations of home and family, and nightmarish images of cannibalism and destruction. This narrative device draws on a tension between diverse meanings of the family within representation, which is figured as a safe, but also a monstrous and restrictive space. (3) Kathryn Bigelow's stylish vampire film set in the American mid-West uses a common strategy of the horror and thriller narrative, a doubling in which monstrous characters echo or parody the heroes and heroines with whom we are called on to identify. Thus in Near Dark the motherless hero Caleb/Adrian Pasdar finds himself involved with a perverse vampire family, which is more 'complete' than his own, providing him with two 'mothers' - Mae/Jenny Wright who feeds him blood from her own veins to nourish him, and Silverback/Jenette Goldstein who is referred to as 'other' at several points. When Caleb is abducted by the vampire family, his own family are seen through the rear window of a camper-van, receding into the distance as one set of blood ties are abandoned for another.

Bigelow has said of her films that

I'm interested in playing with genre, mixing it up a bit to create a hybrid. Near Dark is a sort of vampire Western, and The Loveless is sort of biker-noir. It enables you to invest the genre with new material, seeing where the edges of the envelope are, so to speak.
(4)

The all-American cowboy image of youth culture, invoked by Caleb in Near Dark, is played off against the post-

apocalyptic look of the vampires. The iconography of the western is brought together with the more contemporary references of Severen/Bill Paxton's biker dress, as the once exclusively European vampire is situated firmly within an American landscape. (5) The vampire family is constituted through recognisable types that are rendered disturbing. Homer/Joshua Miller, for example, is an old man in a young boy's body. Adult and childish desires are brought together, to disturbing effect.

A central scene portrays a meeting between Caleb's two 'families'. 'They're my family' says Caleb, appealing for the safety of his father and little sister. This plea follows a sinister masquerade which the vampires conduct in order to fool Caleb's sister, Sarah. They mimic the behaviour of an archetypal television family, Homer shifting from his adult to his child persona, shy in his introduction of Sarah to the rest of the group, Silverback reprimanding him in a motherly fashion. There is a play here around the ways in which we are encouraged to read off character traits and qualities from physical appearance. The shock of the image stems partly from a recognition of the conventional, or cultural, aspects of our knowledge about the world. The mock family appears 'uncanny' in this scene precisely because they are so recognisable - they offer an unsettling masquerade of those 'family values' with which cinema audiences are familiar.

Such an uncanny effect is distinct from the feelings of revulsion which the images of blood-letting and physical destruction in Near Dark might induce, images which the film accompanies by the sort of reassuring black comedy provided by Severen's one-liner's. The specificity of the uncanny stems from the chill recognition of something perceived as quite other, since 'the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' (Freud 1919: 340). The kind of doubling devices, of the two families, of Caleb's vampiric and cowboy persona, of Homer as an adult-child, that are at work in Near Dark, are identified by Freud as a key device associated with the uncanny in fiction. The double is also found in both Blue Steel and Point Break. The double functions to draw attention to the similarity between two apparently different characters or terms. In this process, the instability of supposedly secure categories of classification becomes central.

Further exemplifying this instability, Freud's analysis of the 'uncanny' begins with a lengthy etymological exposition of the relationship between two German words, heimlich (homely) and unheimlich (the uncanny). At a certain point in the uses of the word heimlich, which connotes homely, cosy, familiar, known qualities, the meaning of the term bizarrely shifts, acquiring the connotations of its opposite. But, as Freud points out, this is not an

inversion. Rather, some too familiar qualities have become the subject of repression, so that their very sense of familiarity renders these qualities uncanny. Thus:

the word heimlich is not unambiguous...on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight. [...] Thus heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich. Unheimlich is in some way or other a sub-species of heimlich (ibid: 345-7).

Freud further develops his analysis of the uncanny in relationship to the deployment of the familiar device of doubling - the doppelganger - in horror and uncanny fiction. This device is seen as initially stemming from primary narcissism functioning as, in effect, a doubling of the ego which guards against death. (6) Though the double may begin as a narcissistic assertion of self, it is ultimately, through repression and disavowal, transformed into a site of negative qualities.

This type of narcissism, the reinforcement of identity through the production of a double with which to identify, bears a close relationship to the narcissism at work in our relationship to the cinematic image. Yet the double here is also a potentially troubling figure who comes to threaten the hero's identity. (7) In Near Dark Caleb loses and finds himself once more. The exchanges of blood between Caleb, Mae and Caleb's father - it is through blood transfusions that the two are rescued from their vampiric existence - signify both the instability and the

reassertion of bodily boundaries. Both the device of the double and the instance of the heimlich-unheimlich relation evidence the close relationship between terms, within language, fiction and fantasy, that seem to be opposed. This process may be more apparent in the horror cinema, but the operation of this kind of narrative dynamic within all kinds of fictions is indicative of the repeated establishment and erasure of the boundaries between supposedly clear categories of classification. While the discussion of Blue Steel and Point Break that follows returns more directly to gender, my comments on Near Dark emphasise the importance of spaces and sites for identification rather than particular characters. (8)

'Blue Steel': Ambiguity and the Action Heroine

The psychological thriller Blue Steel positions rookie cop Megan Turner/Jamie Lee Curtis at the centre of a police narrative. When Turner shoots a robber at a grocery store, she is suspended on her first night out, forced to hand over the badge and gun that she has only just acquired. No gun is found at the scene, and while the audience has seen Eugene Hunt/Ron Silver take the gun used in the hold-up, the police investigators assume that Turner was at fault, that she has killed an unarmed man. Eugene becomes obsessed with Turner, carving her name on the bullets he uses to kill his randomly chosen victims. He further contrives to meet Megan and they develop a relationship.

Turner's usefulness as a victim leads to her reinstatement on the force, as a detective-cum-decoy.

Blue Steel does not shy away from an exploration of the sexualised aspects of the position of women in the action film. Deploying an elaborate weapons fetish, the film puts into play a conventional set of associations between guns and images of a specifically masculine power. Bigelow comments that 'films are most successful when they're provocative, when they challenge your thinking'. (9) What some critics found disturbing was the fact that Blue Steel not only explores the relationship between sexuality, gender and the imagery surrounding guns in the Hollywood cinema, but that the film takes an obvious pleasure in the images that this generates. Thus, the disturbing implications of fetishism surrounding women and guns are drawn out. At the same time as we are invited to share in it - to identify with images of power that are rendered ambiguous, suspect.

The credit sequence features soft, ghostly music over images that move slowly in close-up around a handgun, emphasising the different textures of the metal, the bullets and the grip. After the gun is slipped into her holster we see fragmented images of Turner dressing in her police uniform of blue shirt over lacy bra, patent lace-up shoes, black tie, white gloves and a shiny cap. In close-

up Turner's face looks to camera. She adjusts her cap and smiles - at a mirror or at us. After the graduating ceremony, during which massed ranks of uniformed figures officially become police officers, a brief sequence shows Turner strutting down the street in her uniform. She is grinning and swaggering as two women, who have just walked past her, turn back to look in admiration. As she climbs the steps to her building a neighbour is taken back by her appearance. There is a strong sense of transformation. Turner has acquired a confident control of space through the act of dressing up. This sequence, of Turner dressing in her police uniform, is reprised at the end of the film. Though she has been raped by Eugene and hospitalised by the police, Turner refuses to be rendered passive, knocking out a male uniformed officer, stealing his clothes and going after Eugene to finally dispatch him in a surreal shoot-out sequence.

In the film's pre-credit sequence we follow Turner, gun drawn, through a corridor which resounds with the sounds of a violent domestic quarrel. This incident of domestic violence turns out to be a training exercise for Turner, an exercise in which she fails. She shoots the 'husband' but the 'wife' shoots her. 'In the field, you've gotta have eyes in the back of your head' the instructor tells Turner. More significantly in terms of the film's repertoire of images of women-with-guns, the figure of the 'wife' cannot

be relied upon to play the part that Turner expects of her in the domestic scenario - someone who wants her help. A different version of this training exercise faults Starling/Jodie Foster in Silence of the Lambs when she fails to check the corner behind her on entering a room. In both cases inexperience is emphasised - the heroines do not control space. In the opening images of Blue Steel this inexperience is directly linked to expectations around gendered behaviour (the 'wife' as victim is also a threat). Blue Steel might be said to enact a conventional scenario which punishes the female character's transgressive desire to become a powerful figure. The film unsettles through uncovering Turner's complex involvement in a fetishism around weapons, shared by both Eugene and the film itself. However, this reading neglects the very power of the images it puts to work, and the pleasures those images of transgression may offer to us, pleasures to which the film itself rather self-consciously draws our attention.

Within the pared down narrative world of Blue Steel, Turner is an isolated figure. Interrogated as to who could be killing in her name she insists that she doesn't know anybody, listing 'my mum, my dad, my friend Tracy, her husband John' as the extent of her social world. Blue Steel knits together a family drama with its police drama. The story of Megan's relationship with her mother and father is juxtaposed with her conflict with Eugene and with

the police department. These narratives and relationships are brought together around the enigma of Megan Turner as a woman-in-uniform-with-a-gun. Her image and her role as policewoman make Turner the object of admiration, surprise, shock and disgust. At various points in the film, characters comment on and inquire about Turner's decision to become a cop. After the graduation ceremony, she embraces her best friend Tracy/Elizabeth Pena who is the first to say that she 'can't believe it'. Megan's father Frank/Philip Bosco will hardly speak to her, spitting out 'I've got a goddamn cop for a daughter'. These emotions and responses, present so forcefully in the film, were replicated in critical reactions to Blue Steel and its subject matter. There is an intriguing paralell here with the fashion in which Kathryn Bigelow is repeatedly asked in interviews why a woman is directing action films. Bigelow, like Turner is often called on to explain herself. (10)

The question of Megan's motivation recurs repeatedly in Blue Steel. Her desire to play with the signifiers of power distances her from her family and from the 'normal' social world of marriage and family. Instead, she attracts the attentions of the psychopathic Eugene. On her first night out on patrol, Megan is asked 'why?'. She gives a jokey answer that she always 'wanted to shoot people' though her partner isn't sure whether she is serious or not, particularly since she promptly shoots and kills a man

holding-up a grocery store. Later she tells a man, who her friend Tracy has set her up with, that she likes to 'slam people's faces up against the wall'. Finally when Detective Nick Mann/Clancy Brown asks her 'why' once more, she simply murmurs 'him', an ambiguous and open response which could refer to a range of characters or qualities within the world of the film. This ambiguous reference to a 'him' motivating Megan, also represents an inflection of the series of dead women who function as motivation for the hero's alienated quest in many action films.

The repeated questioning of Megan's motivation serves to emphasise the difficulty of her location as a woman within the genre. Her desires are placed alongside Eugene's fantasies, which he imagines are the same. Pam Cook describes Blue Steel as an exploration of 'a spectrum of emotions generated by gun worship, from Megan's desire for justice to Eugene's fantasies of omnipotence' (Monthly Film Bulletin Vol 58, 1991: 312). Megan's desire for justice is also, though, bound up in her own fantasies of omnipotence. And, as I have suggested in earlier chapters, a play around such fantasies of empowerment can be identified as one of the key pleasures offered by the action cinema. The lighting and camerawork in Blue Steel produce a dreamlike quality to the image which emphasises the film as fantasy.

Megan's final appeal to 'him', as a justification for her decision to join the police can be seen in terms of the men in the film, her father in particular, but also through them to a generalised 'him', a figure or a place of power to which she aspires. Blue Steel draws on the device of the 'double', in order to problematise those fantasies of omnipotence, drawing the parallels between Megan and Eugene that will ultimately lead to their final confrontation. Megan's father is a pivotal figure, linking the domestic and the police dramas, the familial space and the space of the law. His violence towards her mother further links Megan's father to the first sequence of the film, with its set-up images of domestic violence, a set-up which deceives Megan. A central confrontation comes when Megan finally attempts to take control of this situation, actually arresting her father. She cuffs him and bundles him into the car, though when his disbelieving laughter turns to tears as Megan asks him 'why', she cannot go through with the arrest.

The problems and the pleasures of Blue Steel lie with the instability of Megan's position of power. Pam Cook picks up on the film's ambiguity, noting that Megan's gun both 'endows her with power, yet simultaneously transforms her into a fetish object' (ibid.). Whilst there is a specificity to this film's use of the woman as cop, particularly in its playful use of a popularised

psychoanalysis, Megan is situated generically, put in a similar position to the heros and heroines of other action narratives. The suffering that the body of the white male hero is subject to in the action film is rewritten for a female protagonist in Blue Steel. As in the very different Thelma and Louise, images of rape are employed to signify the violation that the central character undergoes. But the film also makes use of the boyish aspects of Curtis' star image to transgress the boundaries of sex/gender that it has to work within. Indeed the use made of Curtis' androgynous image in Blue Steel - the self-conscious play with guns as signifiers of power, her donning of a man's uniform for the final shoot out - serves to explicitly sexualise the 'masculinised' female body. (11)

'Point Break', Masculine Identities and Male Bonding

Point Break is a spectacular surfing movie, centring on the tense relationship that develops between FBI agent Johnny Utah/Keanu Reeves and the charismatic leader of a group of surfing bank robbers, Bodhi/Patrick Swayze. The film brings together action, comedy and an exploration of the sexualised relationship between the two protagonists: all familiar aspects of the buddy format. Like Predator 2, Point Break conducts itself at a hectic pace, with breathtaking underwater and aerial photography for the surfing and skydiving sequences.

Utah and the older FBI man Pappas/Gary Busey with whom he is teamed, are investigating a series of bank robberies committed by a gang calling themselves the ex-presidents. Wearing smart suits and face masks of LBJ, Nixon, Carter and Reagan, the gang conduct lightning bank raids, always eluding capture. Pappas is convinced that the gang are surfers and sends Utah undercover. Utah becomes bound up in the pleasures of the adrenalin-thrills sought and worshipped by the surfers who surround Bodhi. His way into Bodhi's world is through his involvement with a boyish young woman, Tyler/Lori Petty, who teaches him how to surf.

Like Clarice Starling in The Silence of the Lambs Johnny Utah is an agent out to make a reputation for himself. The similarity between the two characters ends there, since they are cast in very different terms. Starling's desperate ambition is remarked upon by serial killer and therapist, Dr Hannibal Lecter, on their very first meeting. This intensity marks Starling out as a very different protagonist from the easy-mannered Johnny Utah in Bigelow's film - a 'hot shot' who is deliberately surly with his FBI superior. Point Break is also very much concerned with different masculine identities. The psychological challenge that develops between Bodhi and Utah infuriates Tyler, who walks off in disgust at one point, commenting on the excess of testosterone at work. Point Break delights in the bodies of its male protagonists. Bigelow has described the

film as a sort of 'wet western', a phrase which indicates a distinctive, and contemporary, combination. Point Break's links with the western exist only at the basic level of a narrative structured around male antagonism, a conflict to be found in a range of American films. Yet the remark indicates the extent to which images of male contest are intertwined with the tendency for contemporary films to present their heroes either nearly naked, or in a series of clinging costumes that display the body.

Surfing provides a context for the production of the body in action as visual display. Shifts in masculine identities and definitions of maleness that are articulated in the cinema, shifts which, as I argued earlier, have evolved partly through the commodification of the male body, are evident in a film like Point Break, which makes the most of the pin-up good looks of its stars. Bigelow argues that Point Break is not a surfing movie since the 'surfing is a state of mind, a metaphor for something else. This is about personal challenge and a flirtation with death' (12). However surfing does not function simply as a 'state of mind' in the film. The spectacle of physicality offered in the surfing sequences drives the narrative onwards - developing both the intimacy and the rivalry between Utah and Bodhi that brings the film to its climax. Intimacy and rivalry are expressed through both the surfing and skydiving sequences as a shared pleasure in, and

competition around, physical performance. Surfing also serves to showcase the star bodies that were one of the film's major selling points.

Rather than being centred on any traditional detection or investigation, the film is visually given over to the spectacle of the male body engaged in physical feats such as surfing and skydiving. An investigative narrative evolves through Bodhi and Utah's exploration of each other. In this drama of 'doubles', in which Utah and Bodhi recognise themselves in each other, a sexualised competition develops between the two men. The pleasures and the perils of this competition are inseparable from the film's spectacular action sequences. For instance, Utah pursues Bodhi by jumping out of a plane with no parachute. He lands on Bodhi's back and the two descend together, echoing their earlier jump when they held hands.

Alongside its use of breathtaking cinematic devices, Point Break seeks to involve the audience in its emotional drama and to bring out some of the more sinister aspects of the male bonding narratives on which it draws. The ex-presidents' bank raids, initially a source of humour and excitement in the film, turn into a deadly game for the protagonists, ultimately resulting in Pappas' death. Similarly, the surfing and skydiving, which initially function as shared pleasurable experiences, become life-

threatening for the characters as the film progresses. The final confrontation between Utah and Bodhi does not come until the film's epilogue, set some months later, in a downpour on a windswept, Australian beach where Bodhi has gone to find the ultimate wave. Utah agrees to Bodhi's final request, letting him walk into the sea to his death.

Philip Strick mournfully asserted that, with Point Break, Bigelow had:

stepped aside from the fascinatingly ambiguous feminism of Blue Steel to deliver a dose of macho claptrap such as to leave John Milius and Walter Hill pale with envy (Sight and Sound December 1991: 48).

The ambiguity of any feminism that might be ascribed to Blue Steel is significant here. Though ideas of the 'macho' form part of its subject, Point Break is also ambiguous in its use of the buddy format. The film draws out the implications of Utah and Bodhi's flirtation with death, which is intimately bound up with their flirtation with each other, a relationship in which the woman, Tyler, represents a token object of exchange. This exchange is also revealed as dangerous, since Tyler is almost killed - caught between the two men's struggle with each other. We are invited to experience the exhilaration that the spectacle produces, but also to see its implications, as in Blue Steel. In an interview given to publicise the film, Patrick Swayze contrasted Point Break to other buddy movies, saying '[R]arely do you get a film about two

guys...that isn't just slap-ass, macho, jokey crap. And the dynamics were very interesting because I wanted to play it like a love story between two men', which is exactly how it appears in the film. (13) The elaboration of the buddy movie as love story is not, however, as new as Swayze suggests. The buddy movie has emerged as a successful formula in the Hollywood action cinema during the 1980s. Though the majority of the examples discussed in this dissertation tend to frame the buddy relationship through comedy, more affectionate incarnations are to be found in earlier films such as Midnight Cowboy (John Schlesinger, 1969) and Thunderbolt and Lightfoot (Michael Cimino, 1974).

Swayze's star image and film successes have been largely constructed within the very different terms of the romance and the action genres, with Point Break bringing the two modes together. His persona draws on a series of negotiations conducted around notions of a 'sensitive' style of masculine identity, and routed through a vague hippy, or New Age spiritualism. His physical grace as a dancer, as well as his physical strength as a fighter, is emphasised in his action films. Swayze's body, his physicality, is equally central to romantic roles, as in Dirty Dancing (Emile Ardolino, 1987) and the hugely successful Ghost. One enthusiastic feature writer suggested that such roles, taken from genres that are often opposed along gendered lines, represent Swayze's own

polarised persona. It is suggested that 'the Texas-born star has managed to exorcise the two extreme sides of his personality - the sensitive romantic ballet dancer and the rough, thrill-seeking cowhand - through his movies'. (14) If this characterisation of Swayze is reminiscent of the distinction between 'new man' and 'action man' discussed earlier, it is clear that, while both types are written through gender and defined by the body, they cannot be understood within a gendered binary that opposes female/feminine to male/masculine. The meaning of the body on the screen is not secure, but shifting, inscribed with meaning in different ways at different points.

Conclusion

I have argued that the films discussed in this chapter articulate many of the concerns of the action cinema in a particularly heightened form. I have also emphasised the importance of spectacle and the staged or fantastic context this provides for identification. Though to some extent atypical (and readable within the terms of authorship) Bigelow's films are also generically located. Further, Blue Steel and Point Break highlight the ambivalence not only of the inscription of gender within action genres, but of an identification with a position of power which is not in itself gendered. These themes are taken up in the conclusion that follows.

CONCLUSION

Though the box-office success of Ghost and Pretty Woman in 1990 caused some journalistic speculation on the imminent demise of the action film, it has continued to be an extremely popular form. Figures for the years 1991-93 (see Appendix 3) indicate the continuing commercial success of action films both in terms of cinema attendances and video rentals. The genre has had little corresponding critical attention, though certain of the films discussed in this dissertation - Rambo, Alien, Terminator 2 and Thelma and Louise for example - have been the subject of some debate. In part then, the aim of this research has been to offer an account of a popular film form that has been largely overlooked. (1)

The framing of this research in terms of a genre study has provided a history (of conventions, iconography, character types and stereotypes) in which to situate the themes and images identified in the contemporary action film. This perspective is important since certain examples - Rambo most obviously in the 1980s - have been discussed as new. I have addressed in some detail the ways in which the popular big-budget action films of the 1980s (and to a lesser extent the 1990s) have been read as indicative of shifts in the representation of the male image (as a backlash against feminism) and of a political conservatism.

By locating the action cinema generically I have sought not only to contextualise the films, but to question the critical approaches typically taken towards them. This has also allowed a broader address to the critical status of the popular cinema.

The Action Cinema as Genre

Several labels have been used to designate the object of study: action cinema, action-based texts, action-based genres, and more specific film types such as road movies, buddy movies, war films (Vietnam war films), the thriller, science fiction, martial arts films and so on. The range of designations is indicative of the difficulties of arriving at a precise generic definition. The Lethal Weapon films are clearly action films, but also draw on the conventions of the thriller or detective film, for example. Alien is a science-fiction/horror hybrid which charts Ripley/Sigourney Weaver's emergence as sole survivor/action heroine. Aliens inflects the generic location by drawing on the conventions and iconography of the war film. Alien3, Death Warrant, Lock-Up and Tango and Cash all locate their (different) action within a prison setting. Though there are similarities between the various crime narratives discussed and those set in time of war or centred around the military, particularly in terms of the characterisation of the heroic figure, there are also distinctions. To some extent then 'action cinema' has been

used as an umbrella term, referring to a diverse range of sub-genres and types.

With 'action' operating as a central term, this study has emphasised spectacular cinematic qualities. For José Arroyo, writing on the release of True Lies, viewing James Cameron's films prompts a comparison with 'Lumières' original audiences' one which stems from 'a mixture of disbelief and delight, a sense of wonderment at the magic of the movies' (1994: 27). In this context we can note that action cinema has proved itself well suited to the blockbuster filmmaking associated with new Hollywood, with its emphasis on film as event and on visual display. Speed (Jan De Bont, 1994), with its spectacular explosions and the ever-moving bus at the centre of its action (it will explode if its speed drops below 50mph), exemplifies these qualities. (2) The genre also produces low and medium budget films, such as the Wesley Snipes vehicle Passenger 57 (Kevin Hooks, 1992) which cannot stretch to as much expensive display as Speed or True Lies. (3) Whether dealing with low, medium or big-budget productions however, this study has emphasised the extent to which narrative themes are expressed through action. Explosions and fights dramatise or orchestrate the concerns of exclusion and belonging, pitting the powerful hero(ine) against exaggerated opponents.

In terms of both the importance of an excitement generated through spectacle and the range of sub-genres that can be included within the action cinema, it is useful to an extent to consider action as a mode, operating across a range of settings. Action does not function as a mode analogous to the melodramatic which structures much, if not all, popular cinema (and certainly many of the films discussed in this dissertation). (4) However, a consideration of action as a term leads to an understanding of the ways in which expectations and pleasures are channelled through particular kinds of visual display. Typical action sequences include fights, car chases and explosions. Rapid editing and the insistent volume of the soundtrack are recurrent features. These elements highlight the themes of the action narrative, which is based around (exaggerated) physical conflict and confrontation. In turn narratives of confrontation facilitate such cinematic spectacle.

Thinking of action in this way allows an attention to the ways in which stories are told, to those elements which do not figure large in either genre criticism or narrative analysis. (5) In this context Richard Dyer's (1977) discussion of entertainment is pertinent. His analysis does not disavow politics in narrative, since Dyer indicates how entertainment offers fantastic solutions to real social problems. Yet Dyer also points to the

significance of non-representational elements in the context of the musical, another spectacular form. Dyer explores the utopian sensibility of entertainment through its articulation of energy, abundance, intensity, transparency and community. However different the action film might be from the musical, these categories have a relation to the dynamics of exclusion and belonging, bonding and isolation, the body as vulnerable and as armour, that this study has explored. (6) The possibility of a political understanding of the experience of spectacle and narrative is discussed further in the final section of this conclusion.

Gender, Difference and Power

The spectacle of physicality - the genre as showcase for star bodies - forms an important part of the genre and of this analysis. Alongside the setpiece action sequences, Speed also offers as spectacle its male and female leads (Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock). In its foregrounding of the body as spectacle, the action cinema provides a productive site for the analysis of discourses of gender, race, class and sexuality. A focus on gender in this research results in part from the fact that where the films discussed have received any sustained critical commentary, it has been largely in terms of a developing debate about images of men and masculinity. However, a consideration of the images and enactment of masculine identity found in the

action cinema should be understood not only in terms of gender, but also in terms of the other discourses that the genre highlights. In this context models of the gaze are not necessarily the most productive. (7)

In her analysis of Hollywood masculinities in the 1990s, Susan Jeffords suggests that a redefinition of the action hero of the 1980s is in process. Locating her comments within a contrast between the concerns of the men's movement in the United States and a feminist analysis of men and masculinity, Jeffords comments on films from 1991, suggesting that:

There's hardly a mainstream film from that year with a significant male role that does not in some ways reinforce an image that the hard-fighting, weapon-wielding, independent, muscular, and heroic men of the eighties...have disappeared and are being replaced by the more sensitive, loving, nurturing, protective family men of the nineties (in Collins et al eds 1993: 197).

For Jeffords, referring to films including Switch (Blake Edwards), Regarding Henry (Mike Nichols), City Slickers (Ron Underwood) and Terminator 2, there is a suggestion that masculinity is typically represented in the 1990s as 'sensitive, generous, caring, and, perhaps most importantly, capable of change' (ibid). She finds this trend pre-figured in the transformation of Schwarzenegger's character from tough cop to caring teacher in Kindergarten Cop (1990). (8)

Jeffords' analysis identifies the undeniable importance of fatherhood and an idea of the family in recent Hollywood films. Both Last Action Hero (1993) and True Lies (1994) also explore parent/child relations in an action context, though very differently. Indeed the central conceit of True Lies involves the contradictions between the heroic and the domestic - Schwarzenegger as spy and as family man. Harry Tasker/Schwarzenegger is a spy who has for years lived a lie. His wife Helen/Jamie Lee Curtis and daughter Dana believe him to be a computer salesman. Helen is bored whilst Dana indulges in petty theft. When Helen contemplates an affair Harry turns the resources of the state against her, tracking her movements with surveillance equipment, an armed team and a helicopter. In terms of narrative development the film, like The Last Boy Scout, offers a magical resolution to the problems of the family. Thus the film ends, one year on from the main events, with a happy family of husband and wife working together with Dana a happy (suitably feminised) teenager. This ending is magical in the sense that we are shown no scenes in which the hero actually speaks to his wife and daughter beyond issuing instructions. The attempt to combine a Bond style spectacle (featuring inept Arab villains as foils) with a family drama (rather than romance) produces an awkward superheroism.

Jeffords' criticism of images of nurturing men, that they neglect power and oppression, throws an interesting light on the dramatic failure to communicate found in True Lies. Yet the suggestion of a transformation, that one set of simple images has gone to be replaced by another, is problematic. Although the paternalistic and nurturing action hero does figure in the films of the 1990s, this personification is already present - sometimes signalled as a problem - in the 1980s. Schwarzenegger in Commando (1985), Stallone in Rambo III (1988) and Over the Top (1986) along with films such as A.W.O.L. (1990) and Nico (1988) offer different versions of redemptive parental relationships. (9). If recent films have emphasised this aspect, it is not particularly new. As with the emergence of the muscular hero himself there are antecedents.

An acknowledgment of the co-existence of different types of masculine images and identities, constituted in terms other than gender alone allows another perspective. Jeffords' comparison between the 'tough' images of the 1980s with the character played by Harrison Ford in Regarding Henry, for example, negates class. Henry/Ford is a ruthless and successful lawyer who, after a shooting, is transformed into a caring husband and father. A more productive 1980s reference point for this film might be Wall Street (1987), a film which itself drew crude oppositions between good and bad masculinities based on manual labour and the family

(Martin Sheen) versus the parasitical financial world (Michael Douglas). Class forms a central element in this opposition. (10) It is surely a factor in any comparison between the heroes of Lethal Weapon and that of Regarding Henry.

An analysis of the popular cinema in terms of its articulation of heroic male identities, and any suggestion of transformation that they might offer, should consider differences as well as similarities. Schwarzenegger's personification of government power in True Lies's version of the action hero is quite different from that offered in Hard Target (John Woo, 1993) which continues within the populist tradition identified in chapter five. Chance Boudreaux/Jean-Claude Van Damme confronts a criminal who preys on the homeless, using them as targets for wealthy hunters. Whilst both films present the central figure as heroic, with Hard Target using slow motion sequences to emphasise this stature, this heroism is constituted within different terms.

The action hero of the 1990s can also be situated in relation to the figure of the action heroine - 1991 was also the year in which Thelma and Louise was released, for example. I have argued that changing images of women evolve contingently from particular traditions and that these images should be seen alongside images of men -

informing each other. (11) This study has suggested that images perceived as new might usefully be understood in terms of the representational traditions from which they emerge. A discussion of the action hero involves considering different types of heroic personae found in the popular cinema, such as the private eye. The juxtaposition of the terms 'active' and 'heroine' brings forth other associations. In relation to the representation of women the opposition of active/passive has a special significance. In attempting to locate the appearance of the action heroine in Hollywood films of the 1980s and 1990s, this study has made recourse (as have some films) to other images of female activity - such as the femme fatale. For black women the repertoire of available images from which to draw is limited, given the history of exclusion and marginalisation within Hollywood representation. Whoopi Goldberg's action role in Fatal Beauty draws on her talents as a stand-up comic, a strategy which is a familiar part of the genre but which also indicates the films function as star vehicle. (12)

Whilst noting that Boyz N the Hood (John Singleton, 1991) also addresses issues of fatherhood and the family from the perspective of black American urban life, Jeffords suggests that since 1980s films were 'never meant to figure black men's bodies in the first place', the transformation at stake is somewhat different for images of black masculinity

(205). Here Jeffords recognises that bodies mean differently. For her the figure of Murtaugh/Danny Glover in the Lethal Weapon films was already coded as 'safe, non-lethal, aging'. Thus:

Murtaugh does not have to "discover" his feelings for or through a family, since he has one intact at the beginning of the film. His job, or more pointedly, his masculinity, has not taken him away from his family, largely because, such films imply (the Die Hard series is another example), he has not been out saving countries, artifacts, or corporations (205).

For Jeffords Hollywood continues to define masculinity 'in and through the white male body' (ibid). In her discussion of Lethal Weapon, masculinity is mapped in terms of an opposition between foreign (Riggs/Mel Gibson as lethal, out of control) and domestic (Murtaugh/Glover as family man) bodies, which is then understood in terms of a racial binary.

The fact of Murtaugh's location and developed character in the Lethal Weapon films is generically unusual, a factor which Guerrero reports as having attracting Glover to the role (in Diawara ed 1993: 244). The action cinema has provided a significant space for black performers. Though many films reiterate a history of racist stereotypes, others adapt and evolve from these traditions. Lethal Weapon has been commented on by various critics in terms of an articulation of the inter-racial buddy format. It is also useful to read the films in the context of performers and star images, a context which produces an opposition of

Gibson as star body and Glover as star actor. In this sense a key distinction between Glover's role in Lethal Weapon and Reginald Veljohnson's in Die Hard is that Glover is both a star and a respected actor. (13)

Gender as Performance

I have argued that the meanings of the different bodies displayed, paraded, and commodified in the contemporary action cinema are complex. An articulation of gender as performance has been raised at several points throughout this study, particularly when I have sought to emphasise the ambiguity of images. Judith Butler has argued that the body:

is not a "being," but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality (Butler 1990: 139).

Butler's analysis situates both gender and the body as performative. Identities are constituted through identification, and not essence. Though Butler's analysis neglects the terms of class and race, the examination of processes of identification and the constitution of identities demonstrates the extent to which identifications are made across such supposedly secure, and essentialised, categories as sexuality, sex, gender and race. In the constitution of identity through complex, shifting, identifications, the popular cinema forms one space (but only one) in which identities can be affirmed, dissolved

and redefined within a fantasy space. This space affirms a range of identities at the same time as it mobilises identifications and desires which undermine the stability of such categories. It would be a negation of the operation of power either to argue that all audiences are free to make any identifications they wish, or to ignore the significance of political affiliations constituted out of such identifications as 'sex', 'object choice' or 'race'.

Chris Holmlund's analysis of Tango and Cash and Lock-Up uses ideas of performance and masquerade without eschewing these dimensions. She terms such films 'buddy body movies' which 'combine male action with male spectacle, and foreground matrices of sexuality, class, and race' in distinctive ways (in Cohan and Hark eds 1993: 225). Holmlund suggests that the anxious assertion of heterosexuality within Tango and Cash and Lock Up function as a performance of these qualities which, in enacting them so ostentatiously potentially questions them. Thus the 'doubling and hyping of masculinity in these films only highlights how much masculinity, like femininity, is a multiple masquerade' (224). Presented as a 'queer' reading, her interpretation emphasises the instability and political ambiguity of images.

Interestingly however Holmlund's conclusion offers a

qualification which returns to the distinction between an analysis of the film text and a consideration of its effect. Holmlund notes that while '[M]asculinity may only be a fantasy' the performance of it nonetheless has a potency. She refers in this context to the invocation, the public act of interpretation, of Stallone's films by 'right-wing politicians like Reagan and Bush' (225-6). Whilst masculinity as masquerade destabilises gender it can also be interpreted in other ways. For Holmlund masquerade for both spectators and performers may reinforce 'hegemonic power relations, precisely because masquerade suggests there may be something underneath which is "real", and/or "normal"'. She adds:

It is not coincidental, then, that Stallone's fans are so often conservatives: his mask of healthy, happy, heterosexual, white masculinity is eminently reassuring to the Right.

The status of Holmlund's contention that Stallone's fans tend to be conservatives is unclear. Could this assertion be made as easily of other male stars of the day such as Jack Nicholson, Keanu Reeves, Kevin Costner, Tom Hanks or Eddie Murphy? Are the conservative fans themselves heterosexual white men? As a conclusion this seems to represent an attempt to secure some fixity, though dwelling on ambiguity makes coming to a conclusion difficult. The very instability that is addressed here, through the terms of masquerade, leads to uncertainty.

Cultural Populism/Cultural Paternalism

I have repeatedly pointed to a combination of fear and distaste surrounding the popular cinema, suggesting that this is indicative of a complex set of issues bound up with class, taste and judgement. A political cultural criticism should not necessarily reverse these judgements, valorising popular forms simply because they have been despised. Yet, the political meaning of a contemporary popular figure like the muscular action hero, is far from stable or unambiguous. I have not sought to suggest that action cinema is somehow progressive, but attempted to think about the ways in which such judgements are made.

Valerie Walkerdine observes of Rocky IV and Rambo that while 'it is easy to dismiss such films as macho, stupid and fascist, it is more revealing to see them as fantasies of omnipotence, heroism and salvation'. Instead she understands these fictions as 'a counterpoint to the experience of oppression and powerlessness' (Burgin et.al. eds 1986: 172). (14) Walkerdine elaborates on what the experience of watching these fictions from a particular culturally located position feels like. The narrative triumph of the action hero offers an exhilaration to audiences, which Walkerdine reads through the dynamics of class. This research has pursued this contention at some length in relation to the popular cinema. Our involvement with the characters and situations that are portrayed is

exaggerated, intensified as are the fictional scenarios and the characters themselves. In highlighting emotional responses to fiction Walkerdine also locates this within a notion of fantasy. However, a recognition of these processes does not necessarily exhaust the experience, the popularity or the politics of the films.

I have not sought to suggest that political criticism is inappropriate, but that it is not possible to make easy judgements (either/or) in terms of texts and their ^effect.

(15) The articulation of discourses of race and gender in Lethal Weapon, discussed above, cannot be read as a radical departure from Hollywood stereotypes. Neither can the film be simply seen as reiterating those stereotypes. We can also consider Blue Steel from this perspective.

Turner/Curtis, like other fledgling action heroines, seeks to assert control over space, to gain a position of power. In Steven Shaviro's words her 'uniform frees Turner from conventional gender restraints; it legitimates both her need for control over her own life and her passion for violence' (1993: 6). We can see this operating in relation to her family, her developing romance with Detective Nick Mann and her relationship to the psychotic Eugene Hunt (Man-Hunt).

To an extent, it is Eugene who controls space in the film and in Turner's imagination. After an evening in which he

has taken her in a helicopter to admire the city from above, a sequence shot in dream-like fashion, she dreams that he drops her. Eugene's evident wealth, his control of space is linked iconographically through the film to the way in which he is figured as both middle class and ^Jewish. A long established tradition of American populism opposed honest toil to the parasitical traders of the East Coast, an opposition often rendered through anti-semitism. (16)

Rendered as animal, as other - howling at the moon he bathes in the blood of a victim atop a building - Eugene also represents a mad/bad masculinity (hearing voices as he works out). Whilst for Shaviro Blue Steel 'disrupts the gender codings and power relations implicit in more conventional action films', codes of both ethnicity and class are used in complex ways to construct good and bad identities within the film (1993: 8). Ultimately the political meaning of this film, which Shaviro distinguishes from the genre in which it is immersed, is provisional.

Conclusion

I have attempted to discuss some of the specificities involved in the ways in which the action cinema, centred over the body as it is, orchestrates ideologies and identification. My argument that the range of images and experiences on offer within this form, which have been characterised by many critics and commentators as both simple and obvious, are both rich and ambiguous, stems from

a desire to think about, rather than dismiss, or pathologise, the pleasures of the popular cinema. If the narratives and images of the popular action cinema rarely address the specificity of particular struggles, they nonetheless powerfully dramatise the fact of struggle.

I have also emphasised the visual context from which images emerge, one in which a range of images co-exist. Exploring the field of popular images also involves recognising change. If True Lies offers an awkward superheroism in conjunction with an idealisation of family life, other popular films in the same period offer competing versions. Critically the field also shifts. Inquiries into the complexities of masculinity, rather than the assumption of any naturalised coherence, are now firmly on the agenda. It has been my contention that both popular images and criticism are produced within a particular historical and cultural context and that they might (differently) address a similar terrain.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

INTRODUCTION: GENDER AND THE ACTION CINEMA

- 1 Joseph Bristow (1988) for example, discusses the fragmentation and questioning of masculine and racial identity at work in popular forms such as music and music video. Since the 1980s an increasing number of books and anthologies have addressed the issue of masculinity and representation.
- 2 A presentation by Richard Dyer on the Italian 'peplum', given at the 'Gender and Colonialism' Conference (University College Galway, 1992) usefully situated these films within their national and historical context of Italy in the 1950s.
- 3 A brief summary of the film careers of several African-American sports stars is given in Bogle (1991: 243-5).
- 4 See Laurie Schulze in Gaines, J. and Herzog, C. (eds) (1990) for a discussion of the newly acquired cultural 'acceptability' of female bodybuilding. The drive for such acceptance is clearly part of the project informing George Butler's film Pumping Iron II: The Women. The original film, produced in the 1970s and starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, had done much to shift the image of male bodybuilders from the margins into the mainstream.
- 5 See Willem^en (1981), Dyer (1982) and Neale (1983). Both Dyer and Neale usefully discuss the negotiations involved in the sexual commodification of the male body.
- 6 Other fictions featuring women - such as adventure serials - can be located earlier than the 1970s.
- 7 Linda Hamilton has also achieved a male following within the cult world of science-fiction fans. Letters published in the science-fiction film magazine Starburst, which idolise the Hamilton persona, often in an explicitly fetishistic fashion.
- 8 Though not discussed here, New Jack City (Mario Van Peebles, 1991) can be seen as both a homage to the gangster films of the 1930s and as a distinct development of blaxploitation crime cinema which, while providing a space for black actors and directors, nonetheless still operates within a framework which draws on the ideological links forged within Hollywood between images of blackness, criminality and drugs.

- 9 The commercial relationship between the Hong Kong and Hollywood film industries has become more complex with the advent of co-productions and the worldwide success of certain independent productions from Hong Kong, including Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (Steve Barron, 1990).
- 10 Obviously there is an element of polemic in my assertion. There is a great deal of valuable literature which deals with reader's engagement with romance fiction in particular, and I do not want to suggest that this work is invalid. Contributions to the field such as Janice Radway (1987) offer a fascinating analysis of the pleasures available to readers of romance fiction. More problematic is the notion that romance readers should be weaned off their pleasures and onto something more politically acceptable. See, for example Radway (1986).
- 11 I have explored this issue more directly in relation to feminist criticism in 'Having it all: Feminism and the Pleasures of the Popular' in Lury, C., Franklin, S., and Stacey, J. (eds) (1991).
- 12 In her oft-cited article, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (in Mulvey 1989) it is the political implications of the aesthetics of mainstream cinema that Mulvey seeks to tease out. Whilst such a project is fraught with difficulties, it is also fundamental to a political analysis of culture.
In terms of an analysis of entertainment, Richard Dyer's 'Entertainment and Utopia' (1977) offers a valuable understanding of the sensibilities and the emotions, rather than any explicit political solutions, that are on offer in the popular cinema. This perspective is taken up in the conclusion.
- 13 A projected fourth film in the Rambo series has been the subject of speculation in various interviews with Stallone though it has not, as yet, taken any more material form.
- 14 Duncan Webster (1988) discusses the complex confluence of factors involved in Reagan's success. It is important to note that the exclusively young male audience for Rambo, an audience of which many commentators spoke, was largely assumed.
- 15 Fiedler (1990) contrasts three films in his article, The Deer Hunter, Apocalypse Now and Rambo.
- 16 I am drawing in part here on an unpublished conference paper with which Jane Arthurs kindly supplied me. She reviews a range of media responses to Thelma and Louise

asking 'why was it popularly regarded as feminist? And why was its feminism refuted in such influential places as the Guardian's women's page?'. She concludes by commenting on fears that Hollywood has somehow learnt to incorporate feminism but rejects the pessimism of this view saying:

'I think it is politically foolish to then conclude that feminist culture should only exist outside and in opposition to the mainstream'.

In the same year (1992) I gave a paper at the ICA in London which mentioned the film and was astonished at the strength of feeling against Thelma and Louise on the part of feminist contributors.

In this context recent essays by Griggers and Willis (in Collins et.al. eds 1993) provide interesting re-evaluations of the film .

- 17 See Creed (1987) for a brief discussion which locates the figure of the muscleman star in relation to feminism and postmodernity. This view is taken up at different points through the dissertation.
- 18 See Martin Barker ed. (1984). Horror cinema has repeatedly been the target of campaigns by the national press and pressure groups.
- 19 Duncan Webster (1989) has produced a detailed analysis of the complex, contradictory, and panic-stricken responses that the British press made to Rambo.
- 20 Dyer (1982) talks of the 'strain' inherent in male pin-ups, a quality he also identifies as a central element in western definitions of masculinity.
- 21 Coward (1984), Gaines, J. and Herzog, C. (eds) (1990) and Epstein, J. and Straub, K. (eds) (1991) offer a variety of useful essays on the cultural and sexual politics surrounding the body, sexuality and fashion.
- 22 Laurie Schulze discusses the specificity of female bodybuilding, as distinct from forms like aerobics, in Gaines, J. and Herzog, C. (eds) (1990).
- 23 For a brief discussion of Cindy Sherman's work in relation to images of women see Williamson (1983).
The incorporation of images from popular culture into forms usually associated with high art represents one of the most discussed aspects of a postmodern visual culture. A pertinent example is Su Friedrich's 1987 film, Damned If You Don't, which includes an ironic commentary on the British film Black Narcissus. The film both takes pleasure in and criticises the popular images that it works with.

- 24 Madonna has generated extensive commentaries from feminist and other writers, with debates taking place in forums such as Spare Rib.

For an analysis of the differing forms of address in a range of women's magazines see Winship (1987).

- 25 Powell's discussion of Near Dark and Blue Steel notes that whilst auteurism is theoretically problematic it 'has a particular resonance for feminism' (1994: 136).

An auteurist approach is problematic when taken as the sole element for consideration - in its assumptions about creativity within a complex production process, for example. Nonetheless it is worth noting that many of the films discussed in detail in this dissertation can be linked through the work of different production teams - for example Joel Silver and Gale Ann Hurd as producers, Kathryn Bigelow, John McTiernan and James Cameron as directors, Shane Black's screenplays.

CHAPTER ONE: THE ACTION HEROINE: GENDER, SEXUALITY, RACE

- 1 Star marriages and relationships are food for the publicity machine that both feeds off and supports the star system. When Stallone and Nielson were married and divorced, he was at the height of his box-office success. Pictures of the two working out together regularly appeared in movie, women's, bodybuilding and gossip magazines.
- 2 Several essays in Kuhn ed (1990) discuss Alien in some detail. Most discuss this sequence of this film.
- 3 Mulvey (1989: 32) discusses the legend in terms of the positioning of the spectator within a specifically gendered narrative logic.
- 4 Klaus Thelewait (1987) offers a well-known account of images of the male body as armour within the warrior rhetoric of military culture, though he tends towards a pathologisation of the processes through which identity is formed through the designation of bodily boundaries. The work of anthropologist Mary Douglas in Natural Symbols (1970) and Purity and Danger (1972) provides an interesting counterpoint in this instance.
- 5 Brunsdon (1982) offers a discussion of such films in terms of Hollywood's response to the women's movement. See also Perkins' discussion of the shifting radical aspects of Jane Fonda's star image in Gledhill ed (1991).
- 6 Charlie's Angels began transmission in 1975. Gitlin notes of the 1976-77 season that 'frequently more than

half the total audience tuned in' (1985: 71).

Julie D'Acci notes that one of the 'main paradoxes' of the mid-1970s to early 1980s was that 'women starred in more dramatic programs than at any other time in television history. Series like Police Woman, Get Christie Love, Charley's Angels and Wonder Woman are major offspring of that era' (1994: 15).

D'Acci positions these 'jiggle' programmes in a historical context in which the industry was particularly sensitive to the issue of violence.

- 7 Though the female lead varied through the different seasons, the original Avengers dates from 1961.

- 8 D'Acci provides an extensive discussion of Cagney and Lacey's production history in Baehr, H. and Dyer, G. (eds) (1987) and in D'Acci (1994).

The pilot movie was made in 1980 with Tyne Daly and Lorretta Swit. A series was finally commissioned by CBS in 1982 and ran until 1988.

- 9 For a discussion of I Spit on Your Grave as a rape/revenge movie see Barker, M. (ed) (1984). Lehman reads the film in terms of male masochism (in Cohan and Hark eds 1993). Creed (1993) also discusses the film in terms of a fearful image of female retribution. I should note that though I refer to it here I have only been able to view the film once (it is banned in Britain).

Films dealing with these themes often, perhaps indicatively, shade into horror. For a fascinating discussion of the woman as avenger/survivor in the horror film see Clover's essay in Donald ed (1989).

A distinct motivation for violent action is found in The Assassin (John Badham, 1993) a remake of the French/Italian production Nikita (Luc Besson, 1990) in which the heroine is pressed into service on pain of death.

- 10 The sexual threat that is posed to the protagonist of the action narrative is more heavily veiled in relation to men. The repeated narrative device of the western hero who seeks to avenge a father or brother, who has been shot dishonourably 'in the back' can be interpreted in terms of such fears of vulnerability.

- 11 Jean-Paul Goude's photographs of Jones, which included the presentation of her as a caged animal offer powerful images that are nonetheless linked to a stereotypical emphasis on black women's sexuality.

- 12 The typical Hong Kong narrative referred to here sets up a conflict between two martial arts schools and/or styles. The hero or heroine, who may be single or plural, fights to defend the honour of their school and

the particular style of fighting associated with it against the incursion of a corrupt school, often associated with the Japanese and functioning in Glaessner's words 'as a straightforward stand-in for the institutions involved in Japanese imperialism or for their less overt infiltration into Chinese life' (Glaessner 1974: 36).

In The Chinese Boxer (1969, Lung Hu Tou) a rogue Chinese who has been thrown out of the town some years before, returns bringing with him three Japanese karate experts. After taking on the boxing school the four set up a casino, systematically stripping the town of its assets. Only Wang Yu's character survives. Hidden and nursed back to health by his fiancée, he ultimately defeats the Japanese after a period of intense training. Another example, Fist of Fury (1972, Lo Wei), set in Shanghai's international settlement, portrays the struggles of a Chinese school powerless against an aggressive Japanese school.

- 13 I do not mean to suggest by these comments that sexual violence is somehow not a feature of Hong Kong action cinema - rather I am referring to the slightly different operation of suspension of disbelief in relation to the activity of the heroine.
- 14 It remains to be seen whether sequels, if they are ever made, to Lethal Weapon 3 and True Lies are able to develop the central work/romance relationships that these films set up.
- 15 Nancy Allen's character is finally killed in RoboCop 3 (Fred Dekker, 1993). She dies in Murphy's arms and in her last words asks him to take revenge for her. Her death results from having left her body armour at the police station - saying she is 'off duty' she is unprepared for a shoot-out.
- 16 Paul Verhoeven's Basic Instinct generated controversy in America due to its casting of a 'lesbian' villain. While my own view of the film is more positive, see Galvin's critique of the characterisation in Hamer and Budge eds (1994).
- 17 The event was a women only 'Easter Chicks and Bunny Girls' evening at the Scala Cinema in London (Easter 1992). The adverts for this event offered 'Lesbian Films including Thelma and Louise and Blonde Fist'. Gay road movie The Living End (Greg Araki, 1992) features a spoof killer couple modelled on Thelma and Louise. For a discussion of the latter film in terms of lesbian spectatorship see Wilton ed (1995).

- 18 In the context of sexual politics, the use of a term like 'perverse' is problematic. The term is not used here in a judgemental sense, but to indicate a turning away from the father, a refusal of the 'normal' development of (hetero)sexuality and the restrictive roles that involves.
- 19 Paula Graham discusses the appeal of Red Sonja for lesbian audiences in Wilton ed (1995).
- 20 For example, Dick Hebdige's work on youth culture (1979). Critical work around camp also stresses the appropriation of popular cultural images for and by a group excluded from representation, as in Medhurst (1990). See also Richard Dyer's comments on the significance of the star and the possibilities of reading in 'Resistance through Charisma' in Kaplan, E. A. ed (1980) as well as his discussion of Judy Garland and gay male audiences (1987).
- 21 This aspect of Ghost's construction is discussed in some detail by Judith Mayne (1993).
- 22 See Mercer on the fetishistic representation of the black male body in Bad Object Choices eds (1991).
- 23 Mary Ann Doane expands on the significance of this point for a feminist film criticism which assumes whiteness. Referring to Bell Hooks's work, she notes that 'there is no other of the black woman' (1991: 231). The value of Doane's essay lies in the recognition that 'race' cannot simply be added to the agenda of feminist film criticism, but must inevitably challenge that agenda. If the (black) woman does not exist, black women do.

CHAPTER TWO: RACIAL DISCOURSE IN THE ACTION CINEMA: BLACK BUDDIES AND WHITE HEROES

- 1 Mercer locates the ambivalence surrounding Mapplethorpe's black nudes through a potentially 'subversive deconstruction of the hidden racial and gendered axioms of the nude in dominant traditions of representation' (Bad Object Choices eds 1991: 181). Dyer's discussion of Paul Robeson is also useful in this regard (1987).
- 2 Western constructions of Asian masculinities emerge from a complex, and distinct, history. In terms of the action cinema, a discussion of dominant articulations of Asian masculinity needs to be situated alongside the Hong Kong industry. Richard Fung, in Bad Object Choices eds (1991) discusses images of Asian men within

the world of gay pornography and the western-centred fantasies at work. See also King-Kok Cheung's discussion of gendered identity in the Chinese American community in Hirsch and Keller eds (1990).

Perhaps more significant in the American context is the emergence of a set of anxieties around American masculinity in relationship to Japan, anxieties seen in films such as Black Rain (Ridley Scott, 1989), Showdown in Little Tokyo (Mark L Lester, 1991) or, notoriously, Rising Sun (Philip Kaufman, 1993). Most recently Robocop 3 blames a Japanese company for the oppression of ordinary Americans, pitting Robocop against a Japanese 'ninja' cyborg in addition to the usual 'OCP' villain. Morley and Robbins (1992) offer a discussion of American fears around 'Japan'.

- 3 Predator 2, whilst a box-office disappointment at the cinema (achieving \$15.7m in domestic box office as against \$31m for its predecessor), has had, like Hudson Hawk, a success through the video market.

As Hillier (1992) notes, whilst sequels are generally more costly and less successful than the originals that they follow, they also benefit to an extent from the market automatically generated.

- 4 For a brief discussion of Starsky and Hutch within the context of the development of the crime series, see Buxton (1989). The series was initially broadcast on American television between 1975 and 1979.

- 5 See Ross (1986) and Scott Benjamin King (1990) for a discussion of masculinity, sexual spectacle and Miami Vice. The series, and the critical debates in which it has figured, is discussed further in chapter six.

- 6 Bogle (1991) and Leab (1975) provide some commentary on these films within surveys of black American cinema. See also Hillier (1992). It is important to note that the studios picked up on the existence of a black audience fairly late and following from the endeavours of independent producers.

At a more general cultural level, Time magazine reported, for example, on a new visibility for black female models during the early 1970s. The terms within which this visibility operated remained very much those of the 'exotic' woman (Time July 16, 1973).

- 7 This aspect of the hero's characterisation can also be contrasted to a tendency in the construction of the white action hero, who was increasingly represented as an alienated figure in the period. Often seeking to distance himself from all representatives of authority or community, the white action hero is rarely seen with a family or any other close network of personal ties.

- 8 As well as bearing literary connotations, Marlowe's name also brings with it an ambiguous quality derived from the uncertainty and suspicions attached to Christopher Marlowe as an historical figure.
- 9 Italian ethnicity in American cinema seems at times to signal the success of an (uneasily) assimilated group, but often remains very much tied to images of manual labour.
- 10 In Cyborg (Albert Pym, 1989) this imagery is carried to an extreme when Jean Claude Van Damme's character is crucified. Typically though he has the (fantasic) strength to rescue himself - kicking through the crucifix to which he is bound.
- 11 In many senses the founding text in this respect is Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, serialised in 1851 and published in book form in 1852. Uncle Tom's self-sacrifice quickly became axiomatic of a willing acceptance of suffering. Stowe's novel advocates a Christian morality at the same time as the involvement of the Church in the continuation of slavery is made clear.
- 12 Mercer draws on the work of Fanon to describe the fantasies of black sexuality as excess at work in western imagery and colonial culture. Fetishism functions as a key term in the analysis, indicating the processes of disavowal at work in such images (in *Bad Object Choices* eds 1991: 177).
- 13 In his essay 'The Uncanny' (1914/1988) Freud discusses Hoffman's tale of 'The Sandman', in which the Sandman is a horrific figure who comes to tear out children's eyes if they will not sleep. Freud also suggests a link between fears around the eyes and fears of castration (1988: 352).
- 14 Though Yearwood's opposition relates to extremes it is worth noting, as I have already indicated, the place of stand-up comedy and the verbal dexterity associated with it in the action films starring both Whoopi Goldberg and Eddie Murphy. Here verbal comedy allows the hero/heroine to position themselves at one side from events, and to achieve superiority.
- 15 Predictably, this character is killed off as punishment for helping the hero, thus avoiding any promised reunion between the two.
- 16 That the representation of the white hero has also provoked anxieties in recent years, though in different ways, represents a significant factor. A point in

common between the two figures is the use of humour to partially resolve anxieties generated by the image.

- 17 The industry's desire to appeal to the large constituency of cinema-going black Americans has to some extent produced change. Yet as both Guerrero (in Diawara ed 1993) and Reid (1993) indicate much of the fruit of this commercial imperative has something of a hybrid quality. Chapter three discusses such elements in more detail.
- 18 Wesley Snipes is the star of a new big-budget action film, Drop Zone (John Badham, 1994). Snipes' earlier airborne action film, Passenger 57 (Kevin Hooks, 1992) evidenced its (relatively) small budget in its difficulty in finding expansive enough locations for the heroic action to take place.
The other key star in this respect is of course Eddie Murphy whose recently released Beverly Hills Cop III returns him to a comedy-action role within a spectacular setting. The final shoot-out, which takes place in a theme park, is packed with pyrotechnics.
- 19 James R. Nestebay characterises Tarzan movies as the 'invisible genre' in terms of their absence from discussions of representations of blackness within an American film culture to which they are central (1982).

CHAPTER THREE: NEW HOLLYWOOD, GENRE AND THE ACTION CINEMA

- 1 Dick Hebdige usefully discusses bricolage in relation to the practices of youth culture (1979) and theories of postmodernism (1988). My use of the term 'high art' serves to delineate the distinct, if provisional, institutional spaces within which 'high' and 'popular' culture operates. A recognition of the changes, and similarities between the two realms in formal terms should not obscure the different cultural value and spaces of operation that the two have.
- 2 I am thinking of Jameson's analysis of postmodern culture (1984). Noel Carroll has discussed such contemporary films under a rubric of allusionism which considers referentiality as an aesthetic device (1982).
- 3 Steve Neale's work on genre, in which he emphasises the mobility and transformation of generic convention, has provided an important model in this respect (1980) and (1990).
- 4 Douglas Gomery (1983) points to an economic stasis operating in 'New Hollywood' with the same major companies continuing to dominate production.

Nonetheless, these companies could also be seen to function as publishing houses for production - independent producers thus relied on, but were also to a certain extent separate from the majors in the 1970s. See also Hillier (1992) and Bordwell et.al. (1985).

- 5 Of course the production of series dates back well into the 1930s. It is the big-budget visibility of the contemporary sequels and series that marks their difference to, say the Tarzan films.

Schatz has discussed the intensification of merchandising surrounding the cinematic event of the blockbuster as typical of the commercial strategies of new Hollywood. He points to the case of Disney for whom the success of films and characters feed into more stable commercial ventures such as the theme parks (in Collins et al eds 1993).

- 6 For example, Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger (1985) refute the idea of a distinctively new Hollywood, pointing to the continuation of established forms and practices.

I discuss critical views of the new Hollywood in more detail in Curran, Morley, and Walkerdine (eds) Cultural Studies (Edward Arnold: forthcoming 1996). Tim Corrigan (1991) provides a useful discussion of the relationship between large and small screen.

- 7 The title of Austin's article, 'Home Video: The Second-Run "Theater" of the 1990s', makes the point (in Balio ed 1990).

- 8 See Cubbit (1988) on the use of home video. Walkerdine's essay (in Burgin et al eds 1986) also takes into account the importance of video technology in thinking about the contemporary audiences' relationship to film images. See also Morley (1987) for a discussion of the operation of domestic television and video technologies. It is important to note that in referring to the domestic context of these technologies, I do not necessarily mean familial.

- 9 For example, two recent collections of writings on lesbian and gay culture proceed from this position, elaborating the different ways in which spectators have found a place within texts which exclude them. See Burston and Richardson eds (1995) and Wilton ed (1995).

- 10 I discuss the question of aesthetic strategies and political evaluation in Lury, C., Franklin, S. and Stacey, J. (eds) (1991).

- 11 The distinction used within video retail between 'action' and 'adventure' films tends to relate to the

certificate awarded and the suitability or otherwise for a younger audience. The desire to appeal to a young audience, particularly in terms of potential merchandising, certainly shapes film production.

- 12 Tom Ryall points to the need for a genre theory that will take account of the specificity of popular cultural production as distinct from theorisations of high art (1975/6).
- 13 Though I obviously take issue with Wood and Britton here, their analyses were important in forming this project at all. Both the attempt to speak about the cinema of the 1980s in a meaningful way, and the attention to non-narrative features of popular film have been invaluable. This debt is made more explicit later in the text of the chapter.
- 14 Though I do not have access to definite information, reports and reviews greeting the film's release commented on the transformation that the project had undergone from its initial inception. Lesley Felperin's Sight and Sound review of the commented that the films 'street cred halved when its budget doubled' and speculates on 'what remnants of the original script remain' (Sight and Sound July 1994: 38). Felperin comments in this context on the film's hints at lesbian relationships between the women which remain strangely undeveloped.

The transformation that this project seems to have undergone during the production process is not atypical and can be understood in terms of 'high concept', the production of a film based around a marketable central image rather than being developed from a screenplay that articulates more complex characters and ideas.
- 15 Though in Rambo III (1988) the hero has, as the narrative commences, found a secure place to live in a buddhist monastery in Thailand. He also has something of an affinity for the Afghan people with whom he fights. Significantly though America cannot provide a supportive community for the hero.
- 16 I am aware that judging the reasons for the success or failure of a particular film is a problematic exercise, but the disappointing returns on a film given such extensive publicity, particularly when taken together with its themes and concerns, is nonetheless worth noting.

CHAPTER FOUR: MASCULINITIES AND STAR IMAGES IN THE ACTION CINEMA: THE BODY AND THE VOICE

- 1 Hard Target (1993) starring Van Damme and directed by John Woo represents an interesting amalgam. The stylised use of slow-motion shots combines a display of the body with action sequences.
- 2 To some extent this move also represents a return to the perception of Ford as an actor, given his (minor) roles in such films as American Graffiti (George Lucas, 1973) and The Conversation (Coppola, 1974).
- 3 Eastwood's debut as a director was with Play Misty For Me in 1971. In addition to the acknowledgement of the star's age in In the Line of Fire, Edward Gallafant discusses the extended reference made through the course of the film to Eastwood's role as actor and director (Gallafant, 1994: 229-30).
- 4 For a variety of critical essays that discuss Blade Runner see Kuhn ed (1990). It is also worth noting here that Blade Runner was not a commercial success on its initial release.
- 5 There is a wealth of writing on the discourses of sexuality which underpin the colonial encounter. See in particular Frantz Fanon (1986), Homi K Bhabha (1984), (1985) and ed (1990), and Gail Ching-Liang Low (1989).

There are problems involved, as noted elsewhere, with accepting the sexualised aspects of racial and colonial discourse. Chris Holmlund discusses this effectively in relation to masculinity and the action cinema (in Cohan and Hark eds 1993).
- 6 Dyer (1979) discusses John Wayne's star image.
- 7 Various commentaries on the western have drawn attention to the contradictory position in which the hero is placed. He is a figure who brings order to a community from which he is then excluded. See Mulvey's discussion of this in her 'Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1989) and Neale (1980).
- 8 Valerie Grove Sunday Times March 20 1988: A15.
- 9 Guardian July 20 1985: 8.
- 10 See, for example, Ann Kaplan's paradigmatic discussion of Blonde Venus (1983).
- 11 Recent critical work has, for example, drawn attention to the operation of this equation between physical and

moral health in relation to HIV and AIDS. See Watney (1987) and Rick Meyer's analysis of representations surrounding Rock Hudson (in Fuss ed 1991).

- 12 Jeffords' argument is addressed in more detail in the conclusion. My disagreement with her characterisation of a transition in images of masculinity is to do with the way in which she understands one set of images replacing another rather than co-existing and developing in relation to each other.
- 13 Interview with James Cameron in The Making of T2, a promotional video released before the film itself (an increasingly common strategy in relation to big-budget ventures).
- 14 Exact references for these quotations from the Sunday Mirror and the Guardian are not available.
- 15 Guardian July 20 1985: 8.
- 16 'Dollar does a Rambo' read a headline in the financial pages of one British newspaper (Guardian), referring to the erratic behaviour of the American currency.
- 17 These elements are discussed by Philip Strick in his excellent Sight and Sound review of The Last Boy Scout (March 1992: 49).
Another important figure in this regard is Eddie Murphy who similarly brings together stand-up comic performances with action roles.
- 18 As I write (April 1995) the release of a new Stallone film based on the comic-strip character Judge Dredd is imminent. The extent to which the film version will modify the Dredd as inhuman justice machine 'character' who appears in the comics is not yet clear, though limited pre-publicity has suggested this strategy.
- 19 Holmlund's notes that a recognition of the presence of masquerade does not necessarily effect the potency of a fantasy identity (in Cohan and Hark eds 1993).

CHAPTER FIVE: MASCULINITY, POLITICS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

- 1 See Webster (1989) for a discussion of the hysterical tone of British press responses to Rambo.
- 2 Reagan's jokey comment, which followed the release of 39 American hostages held by Lebanese terrorists, served to cement the link between his policies and the figure of Rambo (see Webster 1988: 236).

- 3 Martin Barker ed (1984) provides a series of essays which discuss the panic over video nasties. See also Petley (1984). As the recent (October 1994) furore over Oliver Stone's Natural Born Killers indicates such fears and uncertainties show no sign of fading away.
- 4 'Rambo' is defined as 'a Vietnam war veteran represented as macho, self-sufficient and bent on violent retribution', a term which is 'used allusively'.
- 5 Gilbert Adair describes Rambo thus:
 With its lovingly, lingeringly filmed violence, its oily sadomasochism, its pornography of blood and biceps, the red meat pornography of Stallone's naked torso and the white meat pornography of young, delicately olive-complexioned, gun-toting beauties in coolie hats and Thai silk pyjamas, with its pidgin-English dialogue and crudely racist Chinoiserie (or Chinese restaurant Chinkoiserie) First Blood II: Rambo is a nauseating artefact, the kind of movie one is tempted to think only the 'public' could enjoy (Adair 1989: 142-3).
 See also Walsh in Walsh and Louvre eds (1988), Wimmer in Walsh and Aulich eds (1989). Fiedler's (1990) analysis is one of the few to express anything other than contempt for the film.
- 6 Quotation from Guardian 29 August 1985: 11. Suzanne Moore's review of Stone's film was symptomatic, running under the banner headline 'Scotching the Rambo myth' (New Statesman and Society 9 March 1990: 44).
- 7 Controversy also surrounded the release of The Deer Hunter (1978) for example. See Easthope in Walsh and Louvre eds (1988) for a situation of such debates within an understanding of the ideological work of cinematic realism.
- 8 Another such film is Rambo III, set in Afghanistan. This was a notorious mistake in marketing terms, since in the week of the film's release the Soviet Union announced its troop withdrawals.
- 9 Walsh and Louvre eds (1988: 56). Rosalind Coward, along with journalists and campaigners from both left and right has also sought to make this equation.
- 10 See Simon Watney's discussion of these issues in relation to representation, sexuality and AIDS (1987).
- 11 I am only addressing one aspect of Jeffords' complex and in-depth study which offers some fascinating

comments on the representation of Vietnam within both American film and political culture.

- 12 Adi Wimmer bizarrely suggests that 'President Reagan, by his own account, was inspired by Rambo to use tougher methods with certain "Mad dogs of the Middle East"' (Walsh and Aulich eds 1989: 184). See also Duncan Webster's (1988) comments on how this type of association - in which popular culture is 'blamed' for foreign policy - works to obscure a political analysis.
- 13 'Dumb movies for dumb people' is actually my own phrase, an amalgam of some of the various responses cited in this chapter (and others which are not cited) which I used as the title for an article in Cohan and Hark eds (1993).
- 14 Problems of locating, perhaps domesticating, the hero can be found in other generic spaces such as the Western and the melodrama. This difficulty derives in part from defining the hero as an isolated figure.
- 15 Kung Fu, the 1970s television series starring David Carradine drew on this confluence of elements. The East functions to signify a certain mysticism.
- 16 Some reviewers, such as Thomas Doherty (1986) for example, picked up on these qualities in Rambo (1985).
- 17 The poem, originally published in 1926, appears in Vendler ed (1990: 41-2). Hughes draws on a long history in Afro-American writings articulating bitterness about exclusion and belonging within America. The title of Frederick Douglass's 1852 oration, 'What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?', is indicative. Douglass tells his audience: 'This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn' (1855/1970: 349). The title of Uncle Tom's Cabin suggests a possession of space (belonging) that is refuted by the text.
- 18 Another critic to develop an interesting analysis around Rambo and populism is Elizabeth Traube, an American anthropologist who explores the relationship of the persona to folkloric traditions (1992).
- 19 See Porteous 'History Lessons: Platoon' (Walsh and Aulich eds 1989) and Clyde Taylor 'The Colonialist Subtext in Platoon' (Ditmar and Michaud eds 1990).
- 20 Obviously this is partly to do with the British perspective from which I am writing, but twenty years on the youthful audience to which the action cinema in

America is primarily directed, may well see the war as historically distant.

- 21 In addition to papers like Jackson's there is a vast range of therapeutic literature around Vietnam veterans. See for example, Robert Jay Lifton (1974).
- 22 Guardian July 20 1985: 8.
- 23 Guardian August 29 1985: 11.

CHAPTER SIX: THE BODY IN CRISIS OR THE BODY TRIUMPHANT?

- 1 See for example Butler (1990), Fuss ed (1991). Just as feminist film studies has engaged in a substantial re-evaluation of images of women, a project ranging over the history of cinema, the emergence of masculinity and the male image as a subject of inquiry has led to a criticism which not only looks at the images and identities to be found in contemporary popular culture, but re-examines the past. Essays in Cohan and Hark eds (1993) are interesting in this respect, looking at a variety of historical periods.
- 2 Dick Hebdige provides a usefully exhaustive list of the many phenomena that the term 'postmodernism' has been used to designate, emphasising the ways in which it has been used to signal changes in arenas from art and culture to philosophy and economics (1988: 181-2).
- 3 Joan Riviere's 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' is crucial here (Burgin et al (eds) 1986). Mary Ann Doane's work on women and the cinema exemplifies a more recent use of these concepts (1991). Doane also discusses the part played by racist fantasy within Riviere's essay, a point rarely taken up in reference to this work.
- 4 The arguments offered in Williamson's polemic essay 'The Problems of Being Popular' are indicative (1986).
- 5 Christopher Norris speaking at the Association for Cultural Studies Conference, Staffordshire, September 1991 talked of a need for a return to the real. Various papers at the Screen Studies Conference, Glasgow, June 1992 also made this argument, with particular reference to the Gulf War.
- 6 Dyer's comments provide an interesting insight on the North American point of production, which is contained within western culture. It is important to note though that the action film which I discuss in this book are popular on the international market, and thus consumed within a variety of cultural and national contexts.

- 7 This discussion is partly based on an essay written with Valerie Hill (1992) in which we discuss Michael Mann's work.
- 8 See Richard Meyer for a discussion of gender and images of Hudson's body (in Fuss ed 1991).
- 9 Feminist debates around the issue of pornography have generated much writing, which cannot be summarised here. However, whilst organisations like Feminists Against Censorship have provided a challenge to the assumption that feminists will inevitably oppose pornography and support censorship, there is something of an orthodoxy in operation. Simon Watney (1987) provides a useful discussion of the relationship between feminist campaigns against pornography, with the passive (and normative) construction of the 'public' this involves, and state censorship.
- 10 Lynne Segal was speaking at the Teaching Media in London conference on Masculinity, January 1992.
- 11 Alan Richman's feature article on Arnold Schwarzenegger is discussed in chapter four and appeared in the American edition of GQ, May 1990.
- 12 See, for example Homi K Bhabha (1984) and (1985); Gail Ching-Liang Low (1989) and essays in Andrew Parker et. al. eds (1992).
- 13 Tough masculine identities also inform the distinct images constructed around American writers ~~E~~ Ernest Hemingway and Norman Mailer, for example. Beyond the superficial elements that might be held in common between these figures, there is also a specificity to the 'macho' image of these literary stars which is partly to do with historical location.
- 14 Holmlund offers some interesting comments on the significance of an Italian ethnicity in Stallone's films. She writes of Lock Up and Tango and Cash that Stallone plays 'a version of the sexy family-oriented Italian he made famous in Rocky' noting how ethnic difference is used to offer up 'good' and 'bad' masculinities (Cohan and Hark eds 1993: 223).
- 15 See Kobena Mercer (1988) on Michael Jackson, and Suzanne Moore's discussion of Prince in relation to postmodernism (in Chapman and Rutherford eds 1988).
- 16 Gilbert Adair (1989) discusses the use of obscene language in Full Metal Jacket. Also see Basinger (1986) for a detailed discussion of the many sub-genres of the war film, including the training camp film.

- 17 Under the headline 'The star who terminated his past' the Daily Mail (July 12, 1991) ran a story reporting Schwarzenegger's hosting of a Gala evening at the Simon Wiesenthal Centre (along with rumours of a large donation). The story explicitly locates the event in terms of the star's image and the work that is put into it - how he 'killed off the Nazi smear'. The 'smear' itself, as well as Schwarzenegger's public attempts to distance himself from it can, like any other element, be incorporated into the star image.
- 18 These workout videos also offer the stars as sexual spectacle. Dolph Lundgren's Maximum Potential seems deliberately filmed to bring out the homoerotic aspects of the muscleman star persona.
- 19 See essays by Philip Brophy and Pete Boss in the 'Body Horror' issue of Screen (1986), which emphasise images of physical disintegration, as well as essays on science-fiction/horror hybrids in Kuhn ed (1990).
- 20 All the Rocky films feature long montage training sequences, generally accompanied by a rock soundtrack. Dialogue in these sequences is largely redundant: they function to demonstrate the labour which leads up to the spectacle of the fight and to offer the body as spectacle.
- 21 Films such as Kid Galahad (Michael Curtiz, 1937) and The Harder They Fall (Mark Robson, 1956) amongst others explore the corrupt world of boxing and the desperate lives off which the sport feeds.
- 22 Joe Flaherty (1982) discusses this aspect of the films, suggesting an intended association between Carl Weathers/Apollo Creed and Ali, between Mr T/Clubber Lang and Spinks.
An equally bizarre set of white fantasies about the black boxer are enacted in Norman Mailer's portrait of Ali in The Fight (1973).
- 23 Sheila Johnstone's review of Lock Up appeared in The Independent 1 February 1990: 13.
See Steve Neale (1983: 10) for a discussion of the wounded hero and his relationship to images of castration in the context of the western.
- 24 For a (polemic) discussion of some of these issues see essays by Susan Jeffords in Cohan and Hark eds (1993) and Collins et al eds (1993).
- 25 Male 'parade' is discussed, in the context of the masquerade, by Heath in Burgin et al eds (1986).

CHAPTER SEVEN: ACTION HEROINES IN THE AMERICAN CINEMA OF THE 1980s AND 1990s: THE LIMITS OF 'MUSCULINITY'

- 1 Kobena Mercer was speaking on 'I Want Your Sex', a documentary on images of black sexuality (Broadcast Channel 4, 12 November 1991).
- 2 See King-Kok Cheung's article in Hirsch and Fox Keller eds (1990) for a discussion of gender, race and the critical reception of Maxine Hong Kingston's work in America.
- 3 Part of the discussion of Thelma and Louise presented in this chapter is taken from my contribution to Berenice Reynaud and Ginette Vincendeau (eds) 20 Ans De Theories Feministes Du Cinema, Paris: CinemAction Editions du Cent., 1993.
- 4 See, for example, Botcherby and Garland (1991); Botcherby (1991); Murphy (1991); Dargis (1991).
As already noted, my discussion also draws on an unpublished paper by Jane Arthurs 'Thelma and Louise: On the Road to Feminism?' (January 1992).
- 5 A video tape of the Kennedy-Smith rape case quickly became available in shops, a point which indicates both the visibility and saleability of this case in particular and rape in general. Date-rape has remained a controversial subject, generating some debate in the British press.
- 6 Janet Staiger has written an interesting account of the American context of reception for Silence of the Lambs), exploring the film itself alongside differing political readings (in Collins et al eds 1993).
Published in the same volume are two interesting re-evaluations of Thelma and Louise by Sharon Willis and Cathy Griggers. Willis emphasises both the body as costume and the importance of recognising the play of fantasy and identification in the pleasure of consumption. Griggers reads the film through its critically neglected lesbian imagery, emphasising the development of the women's identities through the progress of the narrative. Griggers makes a positive comparison between the visibility made possible through Thelma and Louise's play with sexual identity, and the more explicitly lesbian, but socially dislocated narrative of Desert Hearts (Donna Deitch, 1985).
- 7 This point is made in relation to lesbian viewing by Stacey, Wilton and Graham in Wilton ed (1995).
- 8 For example, Janice Radway has suggested, in relation to the project of ethnographic research on the romance,

that 'our' political project is 'one of convincing those very real people to see how their situation intersects with our own and why it will be fruitful for them to see it as we do' (1986: 107). This project, in which nothing can be taken from the popular since 'we' know best, involves the suggestion that 'fantasies can be used as a site for political intervention', a suggestion which fails to recognise the importance of a structure (to which shifting signifiers may be attached) within fantasy (ibid: 120).

By way of contrast we could consider the arguments made by Jacqueline Bobo in relation to The Color Purple in which the responses that readers make to a particular film are given a critical validity. Bobo does not approach her subject matter with the assumption that she can correct deviant readings (in Pribram, ed 1988).

- 9 Jackie Chan's The Armour of God (1986) turns this formula around somewhat. For much of the film the Chinese adventurer heroes explore an exotic European landscape.
- 10 The novel Now, Voyager was written by Olive Higgins Prouty and published in 1942. The film, starring Bette Davis was directed by Irving Rapper and released in the same year.
- 11 This quotation, from Joan Smith in the Guardian is cited by Jane Arthurs (1992). Smith is known as a novelist as well as a journalist - interestingly her 'A Masculine Ending' (1987) attempted to construct a narrative around a female investigator. (Her heroine is an academic with seemingly limitless financial resources. The villain is a 'repressed' gay academic.)
- 12 Trailers for Thelma and Louise emphasised the light comedy, rather than the intense emotions or the relationship between the two women.
- 13 The punishment of the femme fatale in classical film noir was related to the dictates of the Production Code in which crime could not be seen to pay.
- 14 These comments on the form and operation of men's style magazines, draw from a paper on the subject given by Andy Medhurst at the Association for Cultural Studies Conference, Staffordshire, September 1991.
- 15 Griggers also uses the phrase 'butch-femme' - to describe the protagonists of Thelma and Louise. Like my formulation of 'musculinity' the phrase represents an attempt to describe images of women who exhibit

masculine elements without suggesting that they are symbolically male.

- 16 Robson and Zalcock discuss the extent to which categories of identity are rendered unstable in Pumping Iron II in Wilton ed (1995).
- 17 Sue O'Sullivan writes of the problems of achieving a compromise between a lesbian feminist politics and a tolerance/fascination for popular culture. This is in the context of lesbian 'chic' which, as Sullivan suggests is defined in the popular as 'unattractive' lesbianism which is political (in Hamer and Budge eds 1994). I am not suggesting that sexuality is not 'political' or that identifying as lesbian cannot be political (clearly it can), but that the production as 'the lesbian' as an overdetermined space of transgression is problematic in its results. In this sense desire is also ordinary.
- 18 Similarly one of Schulze's respondents describes the image of the female bodybuilder as too 'working class', like 'Tammy Wynette with muscles' (Gaines and Herzog eds 1991: 77). Such a commentary makes apparent the rather obvious point that the responses made by lesbian audiences are also structured through discourses of class. To construct a lesbian audience as necessarily oppositional erases the differences existing within that supposedly simple category.
- 19 The ambiguity of identity represented in Blade Runner has been the subject of much comment. In the context of the concerns of this chapter it is interesting to note that whilst the hero's romantic interest Rachael/Sean Young (a replicant) is visually cast in the style of the 1940s femme fatale - the film also draws on the lighting and mise-en-scene of film noir - she is largely passive within the narrative. Though at one point she kills to protect hero Deckard/Ford, her relation to him is one of extreme dependence.
- 20 Interview in Sight and Sound, July 1991: 18-19.
- 21 The summer of 1995 will see the release of a film version of the cult comic heroine Tank Girl. Both the graphic novelisation of the forthcoming film and the promotional book by Frank Wynne The Making of Tank Girl (1995) suggest that the process whereby the heroine has taken on her active role will not be an issue.

CHAPTER EIGHT: KATHRYN BIGELOW AND THE CINEMA AS SPECTACLE

- 1 Interview in Monthly Film Bulletin Vol 58, November 1991: 313.

- 2 The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Tobe Hooper, 1974) is the most obvious example. Creed situates this amongst a group of films, including Psycho, which locate horror within the family. She points to the significance of the haunted house as a recurrent location, suggesting that 'the house is horrifying not simply because of its appearance...but also because of the crimes committed within a familial context' (1993: 55).
- 3 It is not only within the context of horror that the home/family can signify both restriction and security. Some examples of melodrama might be said to dramatise a tension between these two understandings.
- 4 Interview in Monthly Film Bulletin Vol 58, November 1991: 313.
- 5 I am not suggesting that the location of the vampire narrative within America begins with Bigelow's film. Indeed Near Dark can be situated alongside other examples such as The Lost Boys (Joel Schumacher, 1987) or Fright Night (Tom Holland, 1985).
- 6 Freud cites Rank who argues that the 'immortal soul' represents one of the first of such doubles (1919/1985: 356).
- 7 In Freud's work of course narcissism is complexly developed as a term associated with homosexuality, representing a love of self expressed in object choice, or a stage to be surmounted. As a refusal to grow up, to accept one's place of authority or of submission to authority, I've identified the hero's infantile insistence on his own existence as being of structuring importance to the action picture.
- 8 I am not suggesting here that popular cinema does not encourage us to identify with particular characters, but that such identification is always located within particular scenarios. Thus identification with an heroic figure also involves us in an identification with the scene in which images and ideas of power and powerlessness are enacted.
- 9 Interview in Monthly Film Bulletin Vol 58, November 1991: 313.
- 10 Accompanying the release of Point Break the Guardian ran an interview with Bigelow, by Mark Salisbury, under the title 'Hollywood's Macho Woman' (November 21, 1991: 27). The introduction to the piece runs as follows:
Kathryn Bigelow has been asked this particular question a lot. No matter how delicately you phrase it, how much you skirt around the issue, it comes

down to the same thing; Why does she make the kind of movies she makes? As the sole woman director regularly working in the traditionally male-dominated action movie arena, Bigelow has had to contend with critics ill-at-ease with her proficiency with the medium. Moreover, she does it better than most of her male counterparts.

This particular version manages to evade the fact that Hollywood film production in general, rather than an genre in particular, is male dominated, certainly in terms of the prestigious position of director.

- 11 Curtis's role in the more recent True Lies is in stark contrast. Though she ultimately emerges as a restyled action heroine in partnership with husband Schwarzenegger, the film alternately portrays her as dowdy and thereby comical, or as explicit sexual spectacle.
- 12 Interview with Bigelow, Empire, December 1991: 76.
- 13 Interview with Swayze, Empire, December 1991: 70.
- 14 Interview with Swayze, For Him, November 1991: 39. This interview ran under the title 'Lone star straight', both a pun on the star's Texas origins and a bizarre assertion of heterosexuality! The interview cited in note 11, above, ran under the title 'Cry Baby'.

CONCLUSION

- 1 Through the course of this research I have found little academic material that has addressed the genre. I have however been encouraged throughout by the positive responses I have had from students and other audiences to whom I have presented material around contemporary popular cinema.
- 2 Schatz discusses the blockbuster as the characteristic form of new Hollywood. He emphasises the importance of event status allied to large promotional budgets and sales from merchandising (in Collins et al eds 1993).
- 3 Low budget films, including many released on video, tend to include more 'graphic' (i.e. bodily) violence and destruction. In the drive to sell to young audiences, particularly in terms of associated merchandising, films such as Terminator 2 offer a lower bodycount, though no less number of explosions. A recent Schwarzenegger biography makes the point in relation to the strategy of Last Action Hero: Money, not a sudden surge of moral sensibility,

suggested this new thrust, when the studios discovered that PG-rated pictures were three times more likely to reach the \$100 million mark than R-rated movies (Wright 1994: 151).

- 4 Melodramatic is meant here as distinct from any narrow generic understanding of the term.
- 5 It might be possible to say in this context that it is the combination of action with modes such as comedy, or other genres such as the thriller, that provides significant inflections on the format discussed.
- 6 John Woo writes in this context 'I direct action sequences in the same way that one would choreograph a musical, with every movement planned' (Sight and Sound July 1994: 61).
Steven Shaviro suggests the importance of an attention to visual elements, writing: 'I'm not doing justice to Blue Steel when I discuss it only in terms of script and performance, of character, plot and genre. Bigelow pushes the action film's tired formulas to a point of delirious frenzy through specifically cinematographic means' (1993: 2). Though he seeks to position the film as transgressing the genre of which it is a part, as distinctive, the point is nonetheless appropriate here.
- 7 In her discussion of masculinity and Boyz N The Hood, Robyn Weigman makes this point strongly, arguing that 'the logic of the gaze...needs to be suspended'. For:
It is only...by refusing to reduce gender to the specular embodiment of woman, that we can begin not only to chart the multiplicity of gender's production, but its imbrication and shifting relation to race as well (in Cohan and Hark eds 1993: 180).
- 8 In an article which explores Terminator 2 in more detail Jeffords makes a similar analysis, pointing to the fact that Schwarzenegger had trained down for the part - the body is de-emphasised as a kinder, gentler image is developed. This can also be understood in terms of the star's age and in terms of limits on violence discussed in (3) above.
- 9 These films offer a range of actual and implicit parental relationships. In A.W.O.L. Van Damme adopts his dead brother's wife and child, whilst in Commando Schwarzenegger fights to rescue his own daughter. In Rambo III Stallone's character forms a protective relationship with a child, though the two are parted.

- 10 Contrast also the more recent action roles played by Ford - a Doctor in The Fugitive (Andrew Davis, 1993), as government man in Patriot Games (Phillip Noyce, 1992) (in which he a friend to the Prince of Wales) and Clear and Present Danger (Phillip Noyce, 1994) in which he reports directly to the President. In both Ryan films he battles with beaurocracy, but from a significantly different position to the physically defined heros of the police film.
- 11 Interviewed on Kaleidoscope in 1992 about the significance of Thelma and Louise, I was asked whether women could ever be at the centre of a contemporary western. I thought that this could not happen, that it would strain the iconography of the western too far to be anything by parody. My comments on Bad Girls in chapter three emphasise how, despite the novelty marketing, the film manages this operation. Similarly whilst commenting on the extent to which the male buddy relationship excludes women from the narrative of the action thriller, Lethal Weapon 3 presents just such an incorporation, however awkward.
- 12 Lynn Whitfield's role as a tough police sargeant escorting a reluctant witness (Tony Goldwyn) in Taking the Heat (Tom Mankiewicz, 1992) is a relatively rare recent example of a strong leading role for a black actress. (The film was released straight to video in Britain).
- 13 On the subject of 'foreign bodies' we can note in the context of star images how Schwarzenegger's foreignness has been to an extent normalised - he is an assimilated immigrant. Van Damme by contrast is still generally cast as French, as Canadian or as Creole (despite the nickname 'the muscles from Brussels' he has never to my knowledge been cast as Belgian).
- 14 Walkerdine's reading is a starting point in considering the experience of popular cinema. I do not, however, agree that it is 'easy' to read action films in this way. Rather, I have suggested that such readings emerge from a particular perspective.
- 15 That is, to formulate distinctions between progressive and reactionary texts.
- 16 Webster points to the ambiguities which stem from 'the basic ambivalence of populism' noting how radical protests associated with farming in American history have drawn on 'anti-Semitic conspiracy theories which build on a populist demonology of Jewish Eastern bankers' (1988: 31).

APPENDIX 1

FILMOGRAPHY: PRIMARY FILM TEXTS

This appendix gives the following details for the main film examples discussed in the dissertation:

country of origin and date
production company (**pc**)
producer (**p**)
director (**d**)
screenplay (**sc**)
main cast/characters

Above the Law Hong Kong, 1986

pc: American Imperial
p: Leonard K.C.Ho
d: Cory Yuen
sc: Barry Wong, Szeto Cheuk Hon
cast: Yuen Biao (Jason Chen), Cynthia Rothrock (Sandy Jones), Melvin Wong (Superintendent Wong).

Alien UK, 1979

pc: 20th Century Fox (London). A Brandywine-Roland Shusett Production
p: Gordon Carroll, David Giler, Walter Hill
d: Ridley Scott
sc: Dan O'Bannon
cast: Tom Skerritt (Captain Dallas), Sigourney Weaver (Ripley), Veronica Cartwright (Lambert), Harry Dean Stanton (Brett), John Hurt (Kane), Ian Holm (Ash), Yaphet Kotto (Parker).

Aliens US, 1986

pc: 20th Century Fox. A Brandywine Production
p: Gale Anne Hurd
d: James Cameron
sc: James Cameron
cast: Sigourney Weaver (Ripley), Carrie Henn ("Newt"), Michael Biehn (Corporal Hicks), Paul Reiser (Carter J. Burke), Lance Henriksen (Bishop), Bill Paxton (Private Hudson), William Hope (Lieutenant Gorman), Jenette Goldstein (Private Vasquez), Al Matthews (Sergeant Apone), Mark Rolston (Private Drake), Ricco Ross (Private Frost), Colette Hiller (Corporal Ferro), Daniel Kash (Private Spunkmeyer), Cynthia Scott (Corporal Dietrich), Tip Tipping (Private Crowe), Trevor Steedman (Private Wiezbowski).

Alien3 US, 1992

pc: 20th Century Fox
p: Gordon Carroll, David Giler, Walter Hill
d: David Fincher
sc: David Giler, Walter Hill, Larry Ferguson

cast: Sigourney Weaver (Ripley), Charles S Dutton (Dillon), Charles Dance (Clemens), Paul McGann (Golic), Brian Glover (Superintendent Andrews), Ralph Brown (Aaron), Danny Webb (Morse), Christopher John Fields (Rains), Holt McCallany (Junior), Lance Henrikson (Bishop II).

Basic Instinct US, 1992

pc: Carolco/Le Studio Canal+

p: Alan Marshall

d: Paul Verhoeven

sc: Joe Eszterhas

cast: Michael Douglas (Nick Curran), Sharon Stone (Catherine Tramell), George Dzundza (Gus), Jeanne Tripplehorn (Dr Beth Garner), Denis Arndt (Lieutenant Walker), Leilani Sarelle (Roxy).

Black Belt Jones US, 1973

pc: Sequoia Films. For Warner Bros.

p: Fred Weintraub, Paul Heller

d: Robert Clouse

sc: Oscar Williams

cast: Jim Kelly (Black Belt Jones), Gloria Hendry (Sidney), Malik Carter (Pinky), Scatman Crothers (Pop), Alan Weeks (Toppy), Eric Laneuville (Quincy).

Blue Steel US, 1990

pc: Lightning Pictures. In association with Precision Films, Mack-Taylor Productions

p: Edward R Pressman, Oliver Stone

d: Kathryn Bigelow

sc: Kathryn Bigelow, Eric Red

cast: Jamie Lee Curtis (Megan Turner), Ron Silver (Eugene Hunt), Clancy Brown (Nick Mann), Elizabeth Pena (Tracey Perez), Louise Fletcher (Shirley Turner), Philip Bosco (Frank Turner).

China O'Brien US, 1988

pc: Golden Harvest

p: Fred Weintraub, Sandra Weintraub

d: Robert Clouse

sc: Robert Clouse

cast: Cynthia Rothrock (Lori "China" O'Brien), Richard Norton (Matt Conroy), Keith Cooke (Dakota).

China O'Brien 2 US, 1989

pc: Golden Harvest

p: Fred Weintraub, Sandra Weintraub

d: Robert Clouse

sc: James Hennessy. Based on a story by Sandra Weintraub

cast: Cynthia Rothrock (Lori "China" O'Brien), Richard Norton (Matt Conroy), Keith Cooke (Dakota), Frank Wagner (Frank Atkins), Harlow Marks (Charlie Baskin).

Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold US/Hong Kong, 1975

pc: Warner Bros. (Los Angeles)/Shaw Brothers (Hong Kong)

p: William Tennant, Run Run Shaw

d: Chuck Bail

sc: William Tennant. Based on characters created by Max Julien

cast: Tamara Dobson (Cleopatra Jones), Stella Stevens (Dragon Lady), Tanny (Mi Ling), Norman Fell (Stanley Nagel), Albert Popwell (Matthew Johnson).

Cliffhanger US, 1993

pc: A Cliffhanger BV production for Carolco/Le Studio Canal Plus/Pioneer production. In association with RSC Video

p: Alan Marshall, Renny Harlin

d: Renny Harlin

sc: Michael France, Sylvester Stallone

cast: Sylvester Stallone (Gabe Walker), John Lithgow (Qualen), Michael Rooker (Hal Tucker), Janine Turner (Jessie Deighan), Rex Linn (Travers).

Commando US, 1985

pc: 20th Century Fox. A Silver Pictures production

p: Joel Silver

d: Mark L Lester

sc: Steven E de Souza

cast: Arnold Schwarzenegger (John Matrix), Rae Dawn Chong (Cindy), Dan Hedaya (General Arius), Vernon Wells (Bennett).

Conan the Destroyer US, 1984

pc: Dino De Laurentiis Corporation. An Edward R Pressman production. For Universal

p: Raffaella De Laurentiis

d: Richard Fleischer

sc: Stanley Mann

cast: Arnold Schwarzenegger (Conan), Grace Jones (Zula), Wilt Chamberlain (Bombaata), Mako (Akira), Tracey Walter (Malak), Sarah Douglas (Queen Tamaris) Olivia D'Abo (Princess Jehnna).

Death Warrant US, 1990

pc: Pathe Entertainment Inc

p: Mark DiSalle

d: Deran Sarafian

sc: David S Goyer

cast: Jean-Claude Van Damme (Louis Burke), Robert Guillaume (Hawkins), Cynthia Gibb (Amanda Beckett), George Dickerson (Tom Vogler), Abdul Salaam El Razzac (Priest).

Demolition Man US, 1993

pc: Silver Pictures/Warner Bros.

p: Joel Silver, Michael Levy, Howard Kazanjian

d: Marco Brambilla

sc: Daniel Waters, Robert Reneau, Peter M Lenkov

cast: Sylvester Stallone (John Spartan), Wesley Snipes (Simon Pheonix), Sandra Bullock (Lenina Huxley), Nigel Hawthorne (Dr Raymond Cocteau).

Die Hard US, 1988

pc: 20th Century Fox. A Gordon Company/Silver Pictures Production

p: Lawrence Gordon, Joel Silver

d: John McTiernan

sc: Jeb Stuart and Steven E de Souza

cast: Bruce Willis (John McClane), Bonnie Bedelia (Holly Gennaro McClane), Reginald Veljohnson (Sergeant Al Powell), Paul Gleason (Dwayne T Robinson), De'Voreaux White (Argyle), Hart Bochner (Ellis), James Shigeth (Tagaki), Alan Rickman (Hans Gruber), Alexander Godunov (Karl).

Die Hard 2 US, 1990

pc: 20th Century Fox. A Gordon Company/Silver Pictures Production

p: Lawrence Gordon, Joel Silver, Charles Gordon

d: Renny Harlin

sc: Steven E de Souza, Doug Richardson. Based on the novel 58 Minutes by Walter Wager; Oliver Wood

cast: Bruce Willis (John McClane), Bonnie Bedelia (Holly McClane), Reginald Veljohnson (Al Powell), John Amos (Captain Grant), Dennis Franz (Carmine Lorenzo).

Fatal Beauty US, 1987

pc: MGM. In association with CST Communications

p: Leonard Kroll

d: Tom Holland

sc: Hilary Henkin, Dean Riesner

cast: Whoopi Goldberg (Rita Rizzoli), Sam Elliott (Mike Marshak), Ruben Blades (Carl Jimenez), Harris Yulin (Conrad Kroll), John P Ryan (Lieutenant Kellerman).

First Blood US, 1982

pc: Carolco. For Anabasis

p: Buzz Feitshans

d: Ted Kotcheff

sc: Michael Kozoll, William Sackheim and Sylvester Stallone. Based on the novel by David Morrell

cast: Sylvester Stallone (John Rambo), Richard Crenna (Colonel Trautman), Brian Dennehy (Sheriff Will Teasle), David Caruso (Mitch), Jack Starrett (Galt).

Getting Physical US, 1984 [TV Movie]

pc: CBS Entertainment

p: Marcy Gross and Ann Weston

d: Steven H. Stern

Teleplay: Laurian Leggett. Story by Laurian Leggett, Marcy Gross and Ann Weston

cast: Alexandra Paul (Kendall Gibley), Sandahl Bergman (Nadine), David Naughton (Mickey).

Hard Target US, 1993

pc: Alphaville/Renaissance

p: James Jacks, Sean Daniel

d: John Woo

sc: Chuck Pfarrer

cast: Jean-Claude Van Damme (Chance Boudreaux), Lance Henriksen (Fouchon), Yancy Butler (Natasha Binder), Arnold Vosloo (Van Clear), Kasi Lemmons (Carmine), Wilford Brimley (Douvee), Chuck Pfarrer (Binder).

Heartbreak Ridge US, 1986

pc: Malpaso. For Warner Bros.

p: Clint Eastwood

d: Clint Eastwood

sc: James Carabatsos

cast: Clint Eastwood (Sergeant Thomas Highway), Marsha Mason (Aggie), Everett McGill (Major Powers), Moses Gunn (Sergeant Webster), Mario Van Peebles ("Stitch" Jones).

Kickboxer US, 1989

pc: Kings Road Entertainment

p: Mark DiSalle

d: Mark DiSalle, David Worth

sc: Glenn Bruce

cast: Jean Claude Van Damme (Kurt Sloane), Dennis Alexio (Eric Sloane), Dennis Chan (Xian), Tong Po (Tong Po), Haskell Anderson (Winston Taylor), Rochelle Ashana (Mylee).

Kindergarten Cop US, 1990

pc: Universal. An Imagine Entertainment production

p: Ivan Reitman, Brian Grazer

d: Ivan Reitman

sc: Murray Salem, Herschel Weingrod, Timothy Harris

cast: Arnold Schwarzenegger (Detective John Kimble), Penelope Ann Miller (Joyce), Pamela Reed (Pheobe O'Hara), Linda Hunt (Miss Schowski), Richard Tyson (Cullen Crisp), Carroll Baker (Eleanor Crisp), Joseph Cousins and Christopher Cousins (Dominic).

Last Action Hero US, 1993

pc: Columbia Pictures

p: Steve Roth, John McTiernan

d: John McTiernan

sc: Shane Black, David Arnott

cast: Arnold Schwarzenegger (Jack Slater), Austin O'Brien (Danny), Art Carney (Frank), Charles Dance (Benedict), Tom Noonan (Ripper), Robert Prosky (Nick), Frank McRae (Dekker), F Murray Abraham (John Practice).

Last Boy Scout, The US, 1991

pc: Warner Bros. A Silver Pictures Production

p: Joel Silver, Michael Levy

d: Tony Scott

sc: Shane Black

cast: Bruce Willis (Joe Hallenbeck), Damon Wayans (Jimmy Dix), Chelsea Field (Sarah Hallenbeck), Noble Willingham (Sheldon Marcone), Taylor Negron (Milo), Danielle Harris (Darian Hallenbeck).

Lethal Weapon US, 1987

pc: Warner Bros. A Silver Pictures production

p: Richard Donner, Joel Silver

d: Richard Donner

sc: Shane Black

cast: Mel Gibson (Martin Riggs), Danny Glover (Roger Murtaugh), Gary Busey (Joshua), Mitchell Ryan (General McAllister), Tom Atkins (Michael Hunsaker), Darlene Love (Trish Murtaugh), Traci Wolfe (Rianne Murtaugh).

Lethal Weapon 2 US, 1989

pc: Warner Bros. A Silver Pictures production

p: Richard Donner, Joel Silver

d: Richard Donner

sc: Jeffrey Boam

cast: Mel Gibson (Martin Riggs), Danny Glover (Roger Murtaugh), Joe Pesci (Leo Getz), Joss Ackland (Arjen Rudd), Derrick O'Connor (Pieter Vorstedt), Patsy Kensit (Rika Van Den Haas), Darlene Love (Trish Murtaugh), Traci Wolfe (Rianne Murtaugh).

Lethal Weapon 3 US, 1992

pc: Warner Bros. A Silver Pictures production

p: Richard Donner, Joel Silver

d: Richard Donner

sc: Jeffrey Boam, Robert Mark Kamen

cast: Mel Gibson (Martin Riggs), Danny Glover (Roger Murtaugh), Rene Russo (Lorna Cole), Joe Pesci (Leo Getz), Stuart Wilson (Jack Travers), Steve Kahan (Captain Murphy), Darlene Love (Trish Murtaugh), Traci Wolfe (Rianne Murtaugh), Damon Hines (Nick Murtaugh).

Lock Up US, 1989

pc: White Eagle Productions/Carolco Pictures. A Gordon Company Production

p: Tony Munafo

d: John Flynn

sc: Richard Smith, Jeb Stuart, Henry Rosenbaum

cast: Sylvester Stallone (Frank Leone), Donald Sutherland (Warden Drumgoole), John Amos (Meissner), Sonny Landham (Chink), Tom Sizemore (Dallas), Frank McRae (Eclipse), Darlanne Fluegel (Melissa), William Allen Young (Braden), Larry Romano (First Base).

Making Mr Right US, 1987

pc: Orion. A Barry and Enright production

p: Mike Wise, Joel Tuber

d: Susan Seidelman

sc: Floyd Byars, Laurie Frank

cast: John Malkovich (Dr Jeff Peters/Ulysses), Ann Magnuson (Frankie Stone), Glenne Headley (Trish), Ben Masters (Steve Marcus), Laurie Metcalf (Sandra).

Near Dark US, 1987

pc: The Near Dark Joint Venture. An F/M Entertainment presentation

p: Steven-Charles Jaffe

d: Kathryn Bigelow

sc: Eric Red, Kathryn Bigelow

cast Adrian Pasdar (Caleb Colton), Jenny Wright (Mae), Lance Henrikson (Jesse), Bill Paxton (Severen), Jenette Goldstein (Diamondback), Joshua Miller (Homer).

Perfect US, 1985

pc: Columbia

p: James Bridges

d: James Bridges

sc: Aaron Latham and James Bridges

cast: Jamie Lee Curtis (Jessie Wilson), John Travolta (Adam Lawrence), Anne De Salvo (Frankie), Jann Wenner (Mark Roth), Marilu Henner (Sally), Laraine Newman (Linda), Matthew Reed (Roger).

Platoon US, 1986

pc: Hemdale Film Corporation

p: Arnold Kopelson

d: Oliver Stone

sc: Oliver Stone

cast: Tom Berenger (Sergeant Barnes), Willem Dafoe (Sergeant Elias), Charlie Sheen (Chris Taylor).

Point Break US, 1991

pc: Largo Entertainment

p: Peter Abrams, Robert L Levy

d: Kathryn Bigelow

sc: W Peter Iliff

cast: Patrick Swayze (Bodhi), Keanu Reeves (Johnny Utah), Gary Busey (Angelo Pappas), Lori Petty (Tyler), John McGinley (Ben Harp), James Le Gros (Roach), John Philbin (Nathanial), Bojesse Christopher (Grommet), Julian Reyes (Alvarez), Daniel Beer (Babbit), Chris Pederson (Bunker Weiss).

Predator US, 1987

pc: 20th Century Fox. In association with Amercent Films/American Entertainment Partners

p: Lawrence Gordon, Joel Silver, John Davies

d: John McTiernan

sc: Jim Thomas, John Thomas

cast: Arnold Schwarzenegger (Major Alan "Dutch" Schaeffer), Carl Weathers (Dillon), Elpidia Carrillo (Anna), Bill Duke (Mac), Jesse Ventura (Blain), Sonny Landham (Billy),

Richard Chaves (Poncho), R G Armstrong (General Phillips), Shane Black (Hawkins), Kevin Peter Hall (Predator).

Predator 2 US, 1990

pc: 20th Century Fox

p: Lawrence Gordon, Joel Silver, John Davies

d: Stephen Hopkins

sc: Jim Thomas, John Thomas

cast: Kevin Peter Hall (The Predator), Danny Glover (Harrigan), Gary Busey (Keyes), Ruben Blades (Danny), Maria Conchita Alonso (Leona), Bill Paxton (Jerry), Robert Davi (Heinemann), Adam Baldwin (Garber), Kent McCord (Captain Pilgram), Morton Downey Jnr (Pope).

Pumping Iron US, 1976

pc: White Mountain

p: George Butler, Jerome Gary

d: George Butler, Robert Fiore

sc: George Butler. Based on the book by Charles Gaines, George Butler

narrator: Charles Gaines. with Arnold Schwarzenegger, Lou Ferrigno, Matty Ferrigno, Mike Katz.

Pumping Iron II: The Women US, 1984

pc: Bar Belle Productions. A White Mountain film. In association with Gym Tech USA

p: George Butler

d: George Butler

sc: Charles Gaines, George Butler

with: Bev Francis, Rachel McLish, Lori Bowen Rice, Carla Dunlap, Steve Michalik, Krish Alexander, Sherry Atton.

Rambo: First Blood Part II US, 1985

pc: Carolco. For Anabasis

p: Buzz Feitshans

d: George Pan Cosmatos

sc: Sylvester Stallone, James Cameron. Based on characters created by David Morrell

cast: Sylvester Stallone (John Rambo), Richard Crenna (Colonel Trautman), Julie Nickson (Co Bao), Charles Napier (Marshall Murdock), Steven Berkoff (Lieutenant Podovsky), Martin Kove (Ericson), Andy Wood (Banks), George Kee Cheung (Sargeant Tay), William Ghent (Captain Vinh).

Rambo III US, 1988

pc: Carolco Pictures

p: Buzz Feitshans

d: Peter MacDonald

sc: Sylvester Stallone, Sheldon Lettich

cast: Sylvester Stallone (John Rambo), Richard Crenna (Colonel Trautman), Marc de Jonge (Colonel Zaysen), Spiros Focas (Masoud), Sasson Gabai (Mousa), Doudi Shoua (Hamid).

Red Sonja US, 1985

pc: Dino De Laurentiis. For MGM/UA

p: Christian Ferry

d: Richard Fleischer

sc: Clive Exton, George MacDonald Fraser. Based on the character created by Robert E Howard

cast: Arnold Schwarzenegger (Kalidor), Brigitte Nielsen (Red Sonja), Sandahl Bergman (Queen Gedren), Paul Smith (Falkon), Ernie Reyes Jnr (Prince Tarn).

RoboCop US, 1987

pc: Orion Pictures

p: Arne Schmidt

d: Paul Verhoeven

sc: Edward Neumeier, Michael Miner

cast: Peter Weller (Murphy/RoboCop), Nancy Allen (Lewis), Daniel O'Herlihy (Old Man), Ronny Cox (Dick Jones), Kurtwood Smith (Clarence Boddicker), Miguel Ferrer (Robert Morton).

Rocky US, 1976

pc: United Artists. A Robert Chartoff-Irwin Winkler production

p: Irwin Winkler, Robert Chartoff

d: John G Avildsen

sc: Sylvester Stallone

cast: Sylvester Stallone (Rocky Balboa), Talia Shire (Adrian), Burt Young (Paulie), Carl Weathers (Apollo Creed), Burgess Meredith (Mickey).

Rocky II US, 1979

pc: United Artists. A Robert Chartoff-Irwin Winkler production

p: Irwin Winkler, Robert Chartoff

d: Sylvester Stallone

sc: Sylvester Stallone

cast: Sylvester Stallone (Rocky Balboa), Talia Shire (Adrian), Burt Young (Paulie), Carl Weathers (Apollo Creed), Burgess Meredith (Mickey).

Rocky III US, 1982

pc: United Artists. A Robert Chartoff-Irwin Winkler production

p: Irwin Winkler, Robert Chartoff

d: Sylvester Stallone

sc: Sylvester Stallone

cast: Sylvester Stallone (Rocky Balboa), Talia Shire (Adrian Balboa), Burt Young (Paulie), Carl Weathers (Apollo Creed), Burgess Meredith (Mickey), Tony Burton (Duke), Mr T (Clubber Lang), Hulk Hogan (Thunderlips).

Rocky IV US, 1985

pc: United Artists

p: Irwin Winkler, Robert Chartoff

d: Sylvester Stallone

sc: Sylvester Stallone

cast: Sylvester Stallone (Rocky Balboa), Talia Shire (Adrian), Burt Young (Paulie), Carl Weathers (Apollo Creed), Brigitte Nielsen (Ludmilla), Tony Burton (Duke), Dolph Lundgren (Ivan Drago).

Shaft US, 1971

pc: MGM/Shaft Productions

p: Joel Freeman

d: Gordon Parks

sc: Ernest Tidyman, John D F Black. From the novel by Ernest Tidyman

cast: Richard Roundtree (John Shaft), Moses Gunn (Bumpy Jonas), Charles Cioffi (Vic Androzzi), Christopher St. John (Ben Buford), Gwenn Mitchell (Ellie Moore).

Silence of the Lambs, The US, 1990

pc: Orion Pictures. A Strong Heart/Demme production

p: Edward Saxon, Kenneth Utt, Ron Bozman

d: Jonathon Demme

sc: Ted Tally. Based on the novel by Thomas Harris

cast: Jodie Foster (Clarice Starling), Anthony Hopkins (Dr Hannibal Lecter), Scott Glenn (Jack Crawford), Ted Levine (Jame Gumb), Anthony Heald (Dr Frederick Chilton).

Tango and Cash US, 1989

pc: Warner Bros. A Guber-Peters Company production

p: Peter MacDonald

d: Andrei Konchalovsky

sc: Randy Feldman

cast: Sylvester Stallone (Ray Tango), Kurt Russell (Gabriel Cash), Jack Palance (Yves Perret), Teri Hatcher (Kiki), Michael J Pollard (Owen), Brion James (Requin), Geoffrey Lewis (Police Captain), James Hong (Quan), Robert Z'Dar (Face), Marc Alaimo (Lopez).

Terminator, The US, 1984

pc: Cinema '84. A Pacific Western production. For Orion

p: Gale Anne Hurd

d: James Cameron

sc: James Cameron, Gale Anne Hurd

cast: Arnold Schwarzenegger (Terminator), Linda Hamilton (Sarah Connor), Michael Biehn (Kyle Reese), Paul Winfield (Traxler), Lance Henrikson (Vukovich).

Terminator 2: Judgement Day US, 1991

pc: Carolco Pictures. A Pacific Western production. In association with Lightstorm Entertainment

p: James Cameron

d: James Cameron

sc: James Cameron, William Wisher

cast: Arnold Schwarzenegger (The Terminator), Linda Hamilton (Sarah Connor), Edward Furlong (John Connor),

Robert Patrick (T-1000), Earl Boen (Doctor Silverman), Joe Morton (Miles Dyson).

Thelma and Louise US, 1991

pc: Pathe Entertainment Inc. A Percy Main production;

p: Ridley Scott, Mimi Polk

d: Ridley Scott

sc: Callie Khouri

cast: Susan Sarandon (Louise Sawyer), Geena Davies (Thelma Dickinson), Harvey Kietel (Hal Slocombe), Michael Madsen (Jimmy), Christopher McDonald (Darryl), Brad Pitt (JD).

Total Recall US, 1990

pc: Carolco

p: Buzz Feitshans, Ronald Shusett

d: Paul Verhoeven

sc: Ronald Shusett, Dan O'Bannon, Gary Goldman. Inspired by the short story "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale" by Philip K Dick

cast: Arnold Schwarzenegger (Douglas Quaid), Rachel Ticotin (Melina), Sharon Stone (Lori Quaid), Ronny Cox (Cohaagen), Michael Ironside (Richter), Marshall Bell (George/Kuato), Mel Johnson Jnr (Benny).

True Lies US, 1994

pc: Lightstorm Entertainment Inc. For Twentieth Century Fox

p: James Cameron, Stephanie Austin

d: James Cameron

sc: James Cameron. Based on a screenplay by Claude Zidid, Simon Michael, Didier Kaminka

cast: Arnold Schwarzenegger (Harry Tasker), Jamie Lee Curtis (Helen Tasker), Tom Arnold (Gib), Bill Paxton (Simon), Tia Carrere (Juno), Art Malik (Aziz), Eliza Dushku (Dana).

APPENDIX 2

FILMOGRAPHY: SECONDARY FILM TEXTS

This appendix gives country of origin, director and date of all films referred to in the dissertation not listed in appendix one. In addition director and date are given in parentheses the first time a film is mentioned through the text.

Action Jackson US, 1988 d: Craig R Baxley

All the President's Men US, 1976, d: Alan J Pakula

American Graffiti US, 1973, d: George Lucas

Apocalypse Now US, 1979, d: Francis Coppola

Armour of God, The HK, 1986, d: Jackie Chan

Assassin, The US, 1993, d: John Badham

A.W.O.L. US, 1990, d: Sheldon Lettich

Backdraft US, 1991, d: Ron Howard

Back To The Future US, 1989, d: Robert Zemeckis

Barbarella US, 1967, d: Roger Vadim

Bad Girls US, 1994, d: Jonathan Kaplan

Beverley Hills Cop II US, 1987, d: Tony Scott

Beverley Hills Cop III US, 1994, d: John Landis

Big Sleep, The US, 1946, d: Howard Hawks

Big Trouble in Little China US, 1986, d: John Carpenter

Billy Jack US, 1971, d: Tom Laughlin

Black Narcissus GB, 1946, d: Michael Powell/Emeric
Pressburger

Black Rain US, 1989, d: Ridley Scott

Blade Runner US, 1982, d: Ridley Scott

Blonde Fist GB, 1991, d: Frank Clarke

Body Heat US, 1981, d: Lawrence Kasden

Born on the Fourth of July US, 1989, d: Oliver Stone

Boyz N The Hood US, 1991, d: John Singleton
Braddock: Missing in Action 3 US, 1988, d: Aaron Norris
Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid US, 1969, d: George Roy Hill
Chinese Boxer, The HK, 1969, d: Lung Ho Tou
City Slickers US, 1991, d: Ron Underwood
Clear and Present Danger US, 1994, d: Phillip Noyce
Cleopatra Jones US, 1973, d: Jack Starrett
Cobra US, 1986, d: George Pan Cosmatos
Colour Purple, The US, 1985, d: Steven Spielberg
Conan the Barbarian US, 1981, d: John Milius
Conversation, The US, 1974, d: Francis Coppola
Cyborg US, 1989, d: Albert Pym
Damned if you Don't US, 1987, d: Su Friedrich
Dances With Wolves US, 1990, d: Kevin Costner
Deerhunter, The US, 1978, d: Michael Cimino
Desert Hearts US 1985, d: Donna Deitch
Desperately Seeking Susan US, 1985, d: Susan Seidelman
Dirty Dancing US, 1989, d: Emile Ardolino
Dirty Harry US, 1971, d: Don Siegel
Drop Zone US, 1994, d: John Badham
Duel in the Sun US, 1946, d: King Vidor
Enter the Dragaon US, 1973, d: Robert Clouse
ET: The Extra-Terrestrial US, 1982, d: Steven Spielberg
Evil Dead, The US, 1982, d: Sam Raimi
Fight, The US, 1973, d: Norman Mailer
F.I.S.T. US, 1978, d: Norman Jewison
Fist of Fury HK, 1972, d: Lo Wei

48 Hours US, 1982, d: Walter Hill

Fright Night US, 1985, d: Tom Holland

Fugitive, The US, 1993, d: Andrew Davis

Full Metal Jacket US, 1987, d: Stanley Kubrick

Ghost US, 1990, d: Jerry Zucker

Good Father, The US, 1986, d: Mike Newell

Green Berets, The US, 1968, d: John Wayne, Ray Kellogg

Hamburger Hill US, 1987, d: John Irvin

Hard to Kill US, 1990, d: Bruce Malmuth

Harder they Fall, The US, 1956, d: Mark Robson

Hudson Hawk US, 1991, d: Michael Lehmann

Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom US, 1984, d: Steven Spielberg

Invasion USA US, 1985, d: Joseph Zito

In the Line of Fire US, 1993, d: Clint Eastwood

I Spit on your Grave US, 1978, d: Meir Zarchi

Johnny Guitar US, 1954, d: Nicholas Ray

Julia US, 1977, d: Fred Zinneman

Kid Galahad US, 1937, d: Michael Curtiz

Klute US, 1971, d: Alan J Pakula

Living End, The US, 1992, d: Greg Araki

Look Who's Talking US, 1989, d: Amy Heckerling

Lost Boys, The US, 1987, d: Joel Schumacher

Mad Max US, 1979, d: George Miller

Made in LA (LA Takedown) US, 1989, d: Michael Mann

Manhunter US, 1986, d: Michael Mann

Masters of the Universe US, 1987, d: Gary Goddard

Midnight Cowboy US, 1969, d: John Schlesinger

Missing In Action US, 1984, d: Joseph Zito
Missing In Action 2: The Beginning US, 1984, d: Lance Hool
Mortal Thoughts US, 1991, d: Alan Rudolph
Mosquito Coast US, 1986, d: Peter Weir
Ms45 (Angel of Vengeance) US, 1980, d: Abel Ferrara
Natural Born Killers US, 1994, d: Oliver Stone
New Jack City US, 1991, d: Mario Van Peebles
Nico US, 1988, d: Andrew Davies
Nightmare on Elm Street, A US, 1984, d: Wes Craven
Nikita France/Italy, 1990, d: Luc Besson
Now, Voyager US, 1942, d: Irving Rapper
Officer and a Gentleman, An US, 1981, d: Taylor Hackford
Oscar US, 1991, d: John Landis
Over the Top US, 1986, d: Menaham Golan
Parenthood US, 1989, d: Ron Howard
Parents US, 1988, d: Bob Balabon
Passenger 57 US, 1992, d: Kevin Hooks
Patriot Games US, 1992, d: Phillip Noyce
Play Misty for Me US, 1971, d: Clint Eastwood
Pretty Woman US, 1990, d: Gary Marshall
Psycho US, 1960, d: Alfred Hitchcock
Raging Bull US, 1980, d: Martin Scorsese
Raiders of the Lost Ark US, 1981, d: Steven Spielberg
ReAnimator US, 1985, d: Stuart Gorden
Red Dawn US, 1984, d: John Milius
Regarding Henry US, 1991, d: Mike Nichols
Return of the Living Dead US, 1984, d: Dan O'Bannon

Rhinestone US, 1984, d: Bob Clarke
Rising Sun US, 1993, d: Philip Kaufman
RoboCop 2 US, 1990, d: Irvin Kershner
RoboCop 3 US, 1993, d: Fred Dekker
Rocky V US, 1990, d: John G Avildsen
Running Man, The US, 1987, d: Paul Michael Glaser
Showdown in Little Tokoyo US, 1991, d: Mark L. Lester
Speed US, 1994, d: Jan De Bont
Star Wars US, 1977, d: George Lucas
Stay Hungry US, 1976, d: Bob Rafelson
Stepfather, The US, 1986, d: Joseph Ruben
Stop or my Mom Will Shoot! US, 1992, d: Roger Spottiswoode
Sudden Impact US, 1983, d: Clint Eastwood
Superfly US, 1972, d: Gordon Parks Jr
Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song US, 1971, d: Melvin Van Peebles
Switch US, 1991, d: Blake Edwards
Taking the Heat US, 1992, d: Tom Mankiewicz
Tank Girl US, 1995, d: Rachel Talalay (to be released)
Taxi Driver US, 1976, d: Martin Scorsese
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles US, 1990, d: Steve Barron
Texas Chainsaw Massacre, The US, 1976, d: Tobe Hopper
Thief (Violent Streets) US, 1981, d: Michael Mann
Three Men and a Baby US, 1987, d: Leonard Nimoy
Thunderbolt and Lightfoot US, 1974, d: Michael Cimino
Tightrope US, 1984, d: Richard Tuggle
Towering Inferno, The US, 1974, d: John Guillermin
Twins US, 1988, d: Ivan Reitman

Uncommon Valour US, 1983, d: Ted Kotcheff

Universal Soldier US, 1992, d: Roland Emmerich

View to a Kill, A US, 1985, d: John Glen

Wall Street US, 1987, d: Oliver Stone

Way of the Dragon HK, 1973, d: Bruce Lee

Witness US, 1985, d: Peter Weir

APPENDIX 3

TOP CINEMA FILMS AND VIDEO RENTALS IN THE UK 1991-1993

This appendix lists the top films in terms of cinema attendances and video rentals for the UK in the years 1991, 1992 and 1993.

Top 20 Films at the UK Box Office, 1991

| Title | Country of origin | Box Office |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| 1 Robin Hood: Prince Of Thieves | US | £20,104,692 |
| 2 Terminator 2: Judgement Day | US | £18,179,609 |
| 3 The Silence Of The Lambs | US | £17,119,333 |
| 4 Three Men And A Little Lady | US | £12,967,783 |
| 5 Dances With Wolves | US | £10,598,273 |
| 6 Sleeping With The Enemy | US | £ 9,230,825 |
| 7 The Naked Gun 2 ½ | US | £ 8,790,453 |
| 8 Home Alone | US | £ 8,353,519 |
| 9 Kindergarten Cop | US | £ 8,216,680 |
| 10 The Commitments | US | £ 6,997,113 |
| 11 The Addams Family | US | £ 5,597,749 |
| 12 Arachnophobia | US | £ 5,515,513 |
| 13 Look Who's Talking Too | US | £ 5,265,147 |
| 14 Highlander 2: The Quickening | US | £ 5,250,692 |
| 15 Green Card | US | £ 5,030,887 |
| 16 Backdraft | US | £ 5,028,603 |
| 17 Misery | US | £ 4,715,242 |
| 18 Edward Scissorhands | US | £ 4,299,657 |
| 19 Hot Shots | US | £ 4,284,417 |
| 20 Mermaids | US | £ 3,938,024 |

Top 10 Video Rental Titles and Revenue, 1991

| Title | No. of 1991 rentals | Est. revenue |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| 1 Ghost | 4,661,163 | £9,332,326 |
| 2 Home Alone | 4,105,876 | £8,211,752 |
| 3 Three Men And A Little Lady | 2,448,267 | £4,896,534 |
| 4 Pretty Woman | 2,409,000 | £4,818,000 |
| 5 Die Hard 2 | 2,397,514 | £4,795,028 |
| 6 Robocop 2 | 2,213,999 | £4,427,998 |
| 7 The Silence Of The Lambs | 2,115,727 | £4,231,454 |
| 8 Look Who's Talking | 2,047,406 | £4,094,812 |
| 9 Memphis Belle | 1,524,370 | £3,048,740 |
| 10 The Hunt For Red October | 1,244,948 | £2,489,896 |

Source: BFI Film and Television Handbook 1993
London: British Film Institute.

Top 20 Films At UK Box Office, 1992

| | Title | Country of origin | Box Office |
|----|---------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| 1 | Basic Instinct | US | £15,480,560 |
| 2 | Hook | US | £13,099,578 |
| 3 | Lethal Weapon 3 | US | £11,878,179 |
| 4 | Batman Returns | US | £10,979,599 |
| 5 | Cape Fear | US | £10,360,215 |
| 6 | Beauty And The Beast | US | £ 9,717,735 |
| 7 | Wayne's World | US | £ 9,133,551 |
| 8 | Home Alone 2 | US | £ 8,263,681 |
| 9 | My Girl | US | £ 7,629,917 |
| 10 | The Hand That Rocks The Cradle | US | £ 7,306,665 |
| 11 | JFK | US | £ 7,017,004 |
| 12 | Beethoven | US | £ 6,757,980 |
| 13 | Father Of The Bride | US | £ 6,649,715 |
| 14 | Alien 3 | US | £ 6,552,103 |
| 15 | Patriot Games | US | £ 6,542,299 |
| 16 | Bill And Ted's Bogus Journey | US | £ 5,412,724 |
| 17 | Sister Act | US | £ 5,354,853 |
| 18 | Far And Away | US | £ 4,815,223 |
| 19 | Unforgiven | US | £ 4,689,237 |
| 20 | Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs | US | £ 4,657,649 |

Top 10 Video Rental Titles, 1992

| | Title | No. of rentals | Est. revenue |
|----|-------------------------------|----------------|--------------|
| 1 | Terminator 2: Judgement Day | 3,579,422 | £8,948,555 |
| 2 | Basic Instinct | 3,400,164 | £8,500,410 |
| 3 | Robin Hood: Prince Of Thieves | 3,152,153 | £7,880,382 |
| 4 | Point Break | 3,067,853 | £7,669,632 |
| 5 | Backdraft | 2,656,948 | £6,642,370 |
| 6 | The Silence Of The Lambs | 2,645,204 | £6,613,100 |
| 7 | City Slickers | 2,298,964 | £5,747,410 |
| 8 | Naked Gun 2 ½ | 2,235,216 | £5,588,040 |
| 9 | Hot Shots | 2,200,079 | £5,500,197 |
| 10 | Father Of The Bride | 2,179,089 | £5,447,722 |

Source: BFI Film and Television Handbook, 1994
 London: British Film Institute.

Top 20 Films At UK Box Office, 1993

| | Title | Country of origin | Box Office |
|----|------------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| 1 | Jurassic Park | US | £46,564,080 |
| 2 | The Bodyguard | US | £14,665,069 |
| 3 | The Fugitive | US | £14,002,047 |
| 4 | Indecent Proposal | US | £11,885,752 |
| 5 | Bram Stoker's Dracula | US | £11,548,429 |
| 6 | Sleepless In Seattle | US | £ 9,417,608 |
| 7 | Cliffhanger | US | £ 9,219,405 |
| 8 | A Few Good Men | US | £ 8,416,625 |
| 9 | Aladdin | US | £ 8,167,165 |
| 10 | The Jungle Book | US | £ 7,415,989 |
| 11 | In The Line Of Fire | US | £ 6,817,821 |
| 12 | The Firm | US | £ 6,816,581 |
| 13 | Forever Young | US | £ 6,787,327 |
| 14 | Sommersby | US | £ 6,668,012 |
| 15 | Home Alone 2 | US | £ 5,663,186 |
| 16 | Demolition Man | US | £ 5,628,613 |
| 17 | Under Siege | US | £ 5,422,549 |
| 18 | Much Ado About Nothing | UK | £ 5,133,502 |
| 19 | Groundhog Day | US | £ 5,098,267 |
| 20 | Made In America | US | £ 4,999,057 |

Top 10 Video Rental Titles, 1993

- 1 Sister Act
- 2 The Bodyguard
- 3 Under Siege
- 4 Universal Soldier
- 5 Lethal Weapon 3
- 6 Single White Female
- 7 Home Alone 2
- 8 Patriot Games
- 9 A Few Good Men
- 10 The Last Of The Mohicans

Source: BFI Film and Television Handbook, 1995
London: British Film Institute.

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